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Letter From China

Prayers for a Mosque

Muslims in Chengdu Fight to Save Their Heritage

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The phone lines to the Imperial City mosque have been cut. Blue-and-white police vans stand vigil outside. Judgment day is coming for the 332-year-old temple.

A five-lane boulevard already has been built right up to the grounds of the mosque, which has embraced a quiet tree-studded courtyard since 1666 but is now slated for imminent

destruction. Inside the compound, large black-and-white protest posters hang from classical wooden columns and a soaring carved-tile roof. One asks: "Can China's relics be sold out for money?" Another, couched in patriotic slogans, says: "Long live the great Communist Party. Violating Muslims' rights and interests is prohibited by state law."

From the ancient capital of Xian to the modern-day capital of Beijing, the rush to build China's economy and redevelop the country's

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Li Shuhua stands before the Imperial City mosque, where banners protest the sale of the land for development.



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urban areas has led to the widespread destruction of cultural relics and historic architecture.

The Chengdu case also highlights the uneasy relationship between the Chinese government and the country's growing number of religious believers, among them 20 million Muslims. Authorities allow the widespread practice of religion, but still use repression to control it. But even when not trying to crack down, their often awkward treatment of religion can incite tensions.

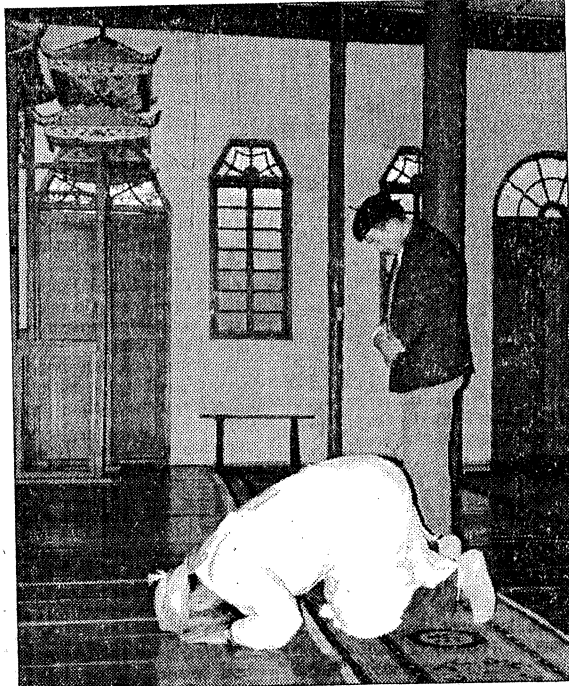
Preservationists say the Qing-era Imperial Mosque—which now occupies prime commercial real estate on the edge of a massive new city square—deserves to be saved not only as an example of early architecture, but because of the values it represents.

"It is a symbol of the relationship between the Qing Dynasty [and] the Muslim community. ... It is a symbol of tolerance—tolerance of other religions," says Edmond Moukala, an official at the United Nations cultural agency, UNESCO, who works to preserve China's cultural heritage. "We need to protect this monument so that [future] generations can know that hundreds and hundreds of years ago [China's] leaders had a good relationship with Muslim leaders."

While midday prayers go on as usual, with men kneeling on long carpets as the local imam sings a haunting paean in Arabic, fears that the last active mosque in the city will soon be destroyed have emboldened many of the faithful.

"Every day I come here to uphold the mosque," says Li Shuhua, 95, who cried when she heard the news, but then decided to come defend it herself.

To avoid just this kind of confrontation, the city built a gray stone mosque with an ornate roof about 100 yards from the Qing-era mosque, but only succeeded in further offending many of Chengdu's more than 10,000 Muslims, who refer to it as the "so-called mosque"



At the Imperial City mosque in central China, Niu Yaowen leads midday prayers. Muslims have worshiped in the mosque for more than 300 years.

and vow never to enter it.

In keeping with China's anything-goes economic development model, the first floor of the new building is reserved for shops and other business ventures—including a restaurant that will sell spicy Sichuan hot pot, which includes pork, an item forbidden to Muslims.

The state-controlled Islamic Association endorsed the city's sale of the mosque's land to developers, and the association has since lost control of the local Muslim community. Members have appointed their own imam.

"Scum from within our [religion] and bad cadres colluded to sell our mosque without the consent of the

masses," says a famous Chengdu calligrapher who asked to be referred to by his Islamic name, Musa. "What the bad people have just built over there can't be called a mosque."

Musa, 88, points out that by defending the old mosque, local Muslims are also promoting the Communist Party's stated policies of protecting cultural relics and promoting ethnic and religious harmony. Still, he expects authorities to attempt to destroy the mosque.

"We'll rely on Allah to give us victory," he says.

Government officials say they have bent over backward for the Muslim community.

"They have already been given

many concessions," says Yang Xiaozhen, a Chengdu official. "The new address is just 50 meters from the old address. What's more, it's a much bigger area, and the building is all new."

Yang says the old mosque stands in the way of Chengdu's development. "It must be knocked down. It's necessary for the city's construction," he says. Officials would not say when they will come in to destroy the mosque.

The city's new grass square, with its old towering Mao statue and surrounding department stores, is seen as key to government efforts to make Chengdu, the capital of China's most populous province, into an international tourist destination. Red promotional banners—"Go all out to make Chengdu China's No. 1 tourist city," proclaims one—are hung throughout the city.

Niu Yaowen, 31, the young imam who runs the threatened mosque, says local Muslims would have been willing to compromise for the good of the city if they had been consulted from the beginning and if officials had proposed to take only the portion of the grounds needed to build a new boulevard. The road would not have harmed the main mosque building or worship hall only several secondary structures. But the city sold all of the mosque's property, he says.

Chengdu's Muslim quarter, including the homes of 120 families were already bulldozed to make way for the square, and the project flattened two inactive mosques that had been confiscated during the Cultural Revolution and were being used as factory workshops, Ni says.

Niu, who also uses his Arabi name Ismail Nebinu, says the old mosque is the core of the community. "When you are born, you come here to get your Arabic name. After you die, then in the mosque we wash you clean," he said. If it is torn down, he adds, "the Muslims in Chengdu will disappear."