ARABIC SOURCES FROM QUANZHOU ON NISBAS OF ARABIA
IN THE 13TH AND 14TH CENTURIES

CHEN Da-sheng
Fujian Academy of Social Sciences
Fuzhou China 350001

Quanzhou is the most important seaport in China on foreign trade in the 9th to the 15th centuries. It had very close relations with the Arabia in the middle Ages. Quanzhou houses many Islamic monuments. Since 1920s, a great number of stone carvings in Arabic and Persian inscriptions were excavated from the ancient city wall. They belong mostly to the 10th-14th centuries. Among those inscriptions 28 "nisbâs" were recorded. Most are places in Persia only three in Arabia and others concern to Turkey, Jerusalem, USSR, China.1 Those three nisbas in Arabia are al-Abyanî and al-Hamdânî in Yemen, al-Tihami in Saudi Arabia. They are very rare evidences in China concerning Arabia in the 12th-14th centuries. The writer will present about the following in this paper:

1. Mosque lintel, about the Yuan Dynasty (1276-1368), excavated at the foot of the South-east city gate of Quanzhou in 1940, Arabic inscriptions on both sides.2

Translation:

a. "This gate was built and this mosque was enclosed with an enclosure by a pours and pure Sheikh Naynâ ʿUmar b. Mansûr b. ʿUmar al-Abyanî al-Yamanî. May God accept him and pardon him!"

---

1 CHEN Da-sheng, Recherches sur l'Histoire de la Communauté Musulmane de Quanzhou (Fujian-Chine), Mémoire Diplôme de E.H.E.S.S., Paris, 1989, pp.36-37.
2 CHEN Da-sheng, Quan-zhou yi-si-lan-jiao shi-ke (Islamic Inscriptions in Quanzhou), Fuzhou, 1984, pp.13-14, fig.16.
b. "And (say) that the mosques are God's, and they should not call on any one with God." (Korân 72:18).

Commentary:

Al-Abyânî was located to Wâdî Banâ 18 km northwest of Aden in Yemen. In the 12th to 15th centuries, Abyân comprised several castles and the seaport of Aden, hence the full name was 'Aden Abyân. It was a prosperous commercial center of South Arabia and main seaport intercoursing the east and Africa (Saddin Island). It was instead by 'Aden in the end of the 15th century. Abyân was destroyed gradually and left today a ruin of about 3 square km. from which were found Chinese porcelain of the 12th – 15th centuries.3

2. Gravestone, about 7th/13th Century, found at Nan-jie street in Quan-zhou, in 1926;4 Arabic inscription.

Translation:

"This is a tomb of a weak woman who needs compassion from Allah the Sublime, mother of al- Sayyid al-Burtumî b. al-Sayyid Muhammad al-Hamdânî. She was died on Wednesday…"

Commentary:

Al-Hamdânî is an ancient tribe of North Yemen. They inhabited originally at north of Sana'. According to An Historical Atlas of Islam, Hamdân was nearby northeast of Aden before the 6th century A.D. and was nearby Sana' north of Aden after 622 A.D.

3. Gravestone, 736/1336, found inside Masjid al-Ashâb of Quanzhou, Arabic inscription on both sides5.

---

3 Makami TSUGIO, Tao-ci zhi-lu (Porcelain Route), Tokyo, 1972, translated by LI Xi-jin, Beijing, 1984, p.46
4 CHEN Da-sheng, Quan-zhou yj-sj-lan-jiao shi-ke (Islamic Inscriptions in Quanzhou), Fuzhou, 1984, p.26, fig.62.
5 Ibid., pp.22-23, fig.51.
Translation:

a. "To go from this illusory world to the world of joy, and to plead for mercy of God the much-forgiving. The blessed, virtuous, abstemious women, Khadija Khâtûn, daughter of the late eminence Khawâja Muʿîn al-Dîn al-Tihâmî. (She died) at the 6th day of month Shawwâl in the 736 A.H. (8 May 1336)"

b. "Every soul shall have a taste of death: and only on the Day of Judgment shall you be paid your full recompense. Only he who is saved far from the Fire and admitted to the Garden will have attained. The object (of life): for the life of this world is but goods and chattels of deception." (Koran 3:185)

Commentary:

Al-Tihâmî: is an ancient adjacent province of Mecca, located along Red Sea coastland on west of Hejaz in today's Saudi Arabia.

Chinese sources from Quanzhou in the 13th-14th centuries also mentioned many places in Arabia. The writer will not explain all them except "Fo-lian" which tallies with the Arabic inscriptions found in Bahrain.

Zhao Ru-kuo mentioned "Bai-lian" as a part in Ta-shi-guo (Arabia). Hirth and Rockhill believed "Bai-lian" is Bahrain.  

Zhou Mi recorded that: "Fo-lian, a foreign Muslim from South and a wealthy merchant in the south Quanzhou, was a son-in-low of Pu. He was rich and owned eighty merchantmen. He died in the year of Gui-si (1293). He left no son and his daughter was very young. The government took possession of his property, and found one hundred and thirty hectoliters of pearls." Kuwahara argued that "Fo-lian" means Bahrain. The writer agrees the opinions of Rockhill and Kuwahara because the Chinese mandarin of "Fo-lian" is pronounced as "Bo-lian" in pronunciation of Quanzhou.

An important evidence found recently in Bahrain was from two Arabic inscriptions. One was dated to 776/1374 which is in proximate time to the Chinese recording of "Fo-lian", and the other was dated about 9th/15th century. Both were recorded with the word of "Fûliyân". Ludvik KALUS identified that "Fûliyân" may be the same meaning of "Fo-lian" in Chinese. He also argued about pearls mentioned in the Chinese record which was very similar state with that in Bahrain in that time.