

ARCHITECTURAL STYLES OF MOSQUES IN CHINA: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Architecture is closely related to people; mosques are but a reflection of Muslims. Mosque architecture in China is a vast subject. It has multiple dimensions. Historically, it spans more than 1,300 years. Geographically, it sprawls as much as the extensive borders of the world's most populous country allow. Racially, it concerns at least ten ethnic groups of the country. Culturally, it reflects how a Muslim minority can adapt to a host society. Yet this list is not exhaustive. The subject could be further explored from other perspectives. However, this subject is not known outside China except by very few specialists. Related scholarly works are limited in number, scope and depth. When preparation is made for this paper, a major difficulty encountered is the availability of information. In most cases, materials are piecemeal. Discussion on the recent situation is also lacking. In view of such circumstances, this paper has tapped into what its authors know from their first-hand experiences in China. This is meant to supplement the information available in related literature so that a better understanding of the subject would be obtained. This paper seeks to provide an overall view of the architectural styles of mosques in China – present-day China. It attempts to give an up-to-date picture of the subject. First of all, a brief historical and social background will be provided. Then, there will be an account of three categories of mosques according to their architectural styles. The distinctive features of each style will be highlighted. Examples will be given as far as possible. The text will be supplemented by photographs, tables and maps. In addition to narration, the analysis will be made whenever deemed appropriate.

Keywords: Chinese architecture, Chinese culture, mosques in China, Chinese Muslims

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I. HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

Islam has a history of over 1,300 years in China. It spread to China in its early stage via the Silk Road, both overland and by sea. Having a long and dramatic past, Chinese Muslims survive some difficult moments in history to become one of the largest groups of believers today in a predominately atheist society. According to the government, Muslims in China exceed twenty million, but it is believed by Muslims that the actual number would even be higher. The probable under-estimation is partly due to the incompleteness of the statistics. Strangely Muslim individuals belonging to non-Muslim ethnic groups are excluded from the official count of Muslims.

China is home to a total of 56 ethnic groups, of which Han is the dominant one. It is in ten minority ethnic groups that Islam is anchored. Hui is the biggest among them, numbering more than half of the country's Muslim population. Hui is distinguished from other Muslim ethnic groups in China not only because of its sheer size but also due to the fact that their language is Chinese.

Chinese history	Muslims in China
Tang & Song Dynasties • Tang (618-906) • Song (960-1279)	• The advent of Islam in China via the Silk Road on two fronts: overland in the northwest and along the coast in the east • Muslims as traders from Arabia, Persia, Central Asia
Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368)	• Muslims coming to China from Central Asia in great numbers • Muslims as soldiers, officials, businessmen, settling down all over China
Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)	• Formation of Hui communities; integration, assimilation, localization
Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)	• At first, growth & prosperity • Later, government oppression & Muslim rebellions
Republic of China (1911-1949)	• Revival
People's Republic of China (1949-)	• At first, progress; then being oppressed & persecuted • Revival

Table 1. Chinese Muslims in history

Hui Muslims spread widely across the country. Hui communities are found in 97% of China's counties, with concentrations in the northwest (provinces of Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region), the southwest (provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou), and the north China plain (provinces of Hebei, Henan, Shandong).¹ (See Map 1) They are the largest urban ethnic minority in most of China's cities. It is remarkable that for centuries they have dominated certain kinds of business throughout China including hand-pulled noodle restaurants, wholesale of beef & lamb, husbandry, tanning, trading of leather & wool.

The other Muslim ethnic groups in China include eight Turkic-Altaiic language groups (Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tatar, Salar, Bao'an, Dongxiang) and one Indo-European Tajik group.² They are found in the two provinces of Xinjiang, Qinghai and Gansu in the northwest of China. (Map 1& Table 2)

Chinese Muslims are found all over China with major concentrations in the northwest, southwest and the north China plain.



Map 1. Distribution of Muslims in China

1 John L. Esposito, General Editor, *The Oxford History of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 443.
 2 Ibid.

Muslim ethnic group	Population (million)	Distribution (province)
Hui	9.8168	Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Shaanxi
Uyghur	8.9392	Xinjiang
Kazakh	1.2505	Xinjiang, Gansu
Dongxiang	0.5138	Gansu, Xinjiang
Kyrgyz	0.1608	Xinjiang
Salar	0.1045	Qinhai
Tajik	0.041	Xinjiang
Bao'an	0.0165	Gansu
Uzbek	0.0124	Xinjiang
Tatar	0.004890	Xinjiang
Total	20.86	

Table 2. Population and distribution of the 10 Muslim minority ethnic groups in China³

Among the different kinds of places of worship in China, mosques take up the biggest number, exceeding 35,000.⁴ (Table 3) While the information on mosque distribution in the country is not available, it would be logical to assume that its distribution pattern follows closely that of the Muslim population, i.e., spreading across the vast territory of the country and with major concentrations in the northwest, the southwest, and, to a lesser extent, the north China plain. Among the various Muslim regions, Xinjiang is the most notable. As an exception rather than a rule in the country, mosques abound there, reaching 24,300 in number,⁵ compared with a population of more than nine million. Not only is its mosque/population proportion the highest in China, but it also ranks among the top in the entire Muslim world.

³ Fifth National Population Census of 2000.

⁴ Ding, Kejia. *Arts of Hui Muslim in China*, (Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press, 2008), 52.

⁵ Information office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's ethnic policy and common prosperity and development of all ethnic groups", China Daily, 27 December 2009, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-09/27/content_8742753_2.htm> (assessed 28 March 2011).

Religion	Number of places of worship ⁶	Number of worshippers
Islam	35,000 mosques	23,000,000 Muslims ⁷
Buddhism	13,000 temples	100,000,000 Buddhists ⁸
Protestantism	12,000 churches & 25,000 centers	23,000,000 Protestants ⁹
Catholicism	4,600 churches	5,500,000 Catholics ¹⁰
Taoism	1,500 temples	100,000 Taoists ¹¹
Total		151,600,000 believers
Note: Total population of China: 1.3 billion		

Table 3. Religions in China

II. THREE STYLISTIC CATEGORIES OF MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE

The mosques in China can be divided into three categories according to their architectural styles:

Chinese traditional, mixed, and Uyghur. While the first two types can be found throughout China, the third category is limited to the province of Xinjiang which is home to the Uyghurs, the second-biggest Muslim ethnic group in China. (Table 4)

⁶ "A Political Vision of Democracy in China", White Paper No.3, The State Council of the People's Republic of China.

⁷ Announced by Chen Guangyuan, Chairman, China Islamic Association, in a press interview on 14 March 2010 at Beijing, <<http://www.muslimwww.com/2010/0308/5OMDAwMDAwMTA5OA.html>> (assessed 28 March 2011).

⁸ Rough estimates as reported on various Chinese websites. Official figure from the government is not available.

⁹ Announced by Wang Zuo'an, Director, Religion Bureau, at an internet forum on 9 March 2011 hosted by www.people.com.cn, <<http://2011lianghui.people.com.cn/GB/215096/14100830.html>> (assessed 28 March 2011).

¹⁰ Announced by Wang Zuo'an, Director, Religion Bureau, at an internet forum on 9 March 2011 hosted by www.people.com.cn, <<http://2011lianghui.people.com.cn/GB/215096/14100830.html>> (assessed 28 March 2011).

¹¹ Rough estimates as reported on various Chinese websites. Official figure from the government is not available.

Dynasty	Type	Example
Tang & Song Dynasties *Tang(618-906) *Song(960-1279)	Mixed-style	*Huaisheng Mosque, Guangzhou, Guangdong *Phoenix Mosque, Hangzhou, Zhejiang
Yuan Dynasty (1260-1368)	Transitional period	
Ming & Qing Dynasties *Ming (1368-1644) *Qing (1644-1911)	Chinese traditional style	*Great Mosque of Xi'an, Xi'an, Shaanxi *Hongshuiquan Mosque, Ping'an, Qinghai
Republic of China(1911-1949)	(Era of turmoil, practically no mosque construction)	
People's Republic of China (1949-) *Till opening up in 1979 *From reform & opening up in 1979 to present	(Up to 1979, mostly era of turmoil, practically no mosque construction) *Mixed-style	*Xining Dongguan Mosque, Xining, Qinghai *Great Mosque, Shadian, Yunnan

Table 4. Evolution of architectural styles of mosques in China, excluding Xinjiang

3.1 Chinese traditional style

This type of mosques underscores the localization of Islamic culture in China. It defies the notion of the elements constituting a mosque: impressive dome, towering minaret, flowing arabesque. A mosque of this category has none of these elements. They are not really the essentials. Muslims in China were creative enough to project a totally new image of mosques that is more attuned to their homeland. Chinese traditional architecture is very distinctive from other architectural traditions. When Muslims had firmly established themselves in China after about 700 years since the advent of Islam there, they started to build their mosques similar to the way Chinese Buddhists built their temples. This type of mosques came into being in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) continuing to the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). For about 500 years, Muslims had built their mosques in this manner. It represents the integration of Islamic principles with traditional Chinese architectural planning, construction and formal details. It is a success story. On the one hand, mosques of this style constitute a distinctive architectural heritage of the Chinese. On the other hand, they are well-appreciated by Muslims beyond the

borders of China. The fusion of Chinese culture and Islamic culture gives a superb hybrid.

3.2. Spatial organization

What makes mosques of this style so distinctive? First is the spatial organization. Chinese traditional architecture lays much emphasis on symmetry with a well-defined axis. A series of courtyards lie on the axis. Buildings are erected surrounding each courtyard. In the case of a mosque, it means major structures like the prayer hall, minaret are located along the axis, with minor structures such as ablution facilities, classrooms arranged on its two sides. Stretching from one end of the axis to the other, the mosque complex is an integrated whole. The succession of courtyards leads from the entrance to the climax at the end, i.e. the prayer hall.



Figure 1. Sketch of the Great Mosque of Xi'an

The Great Mosque of Xi'an (built in 1392, early Ming Dynasty) exemplifies this kind of layout in a perfect manner. (Figure 1) Occupying a rectangular east-west plot of land spanning approximately 12,000 sq. m, the mosque complex comprises four courtyards, the last of which opens to the grand prayer hall. Each courtyard is adorned with a monumental gateway leading to the next. The inner the courtyard is, the richer the architecture becomes. While the first and the second courtyards can be likened to the prelude, the third courtyard features the Pavilion for Introspection (minaret). It is an octagonal three-storied tower. Each storey is wrapped by

a wooden balcony and flanked by sloping eaves. The fourth courtyard, i.e. the last, is where the grandeur of the mosque complex is most felt. Lying in the middle of the courtyard, the Phoenix Pavilion (Figure 2) welcomes visitors to the prayer hall. All these buildings lie on the axis. They are the major structures of the mosque complex. The minor structures are accommodated on the two sides of the axis.



Figure 2. Phoenix Pavilion, Great Mosque of Xi'an

3.3. Exterior of Architecture

Second, the Chinese style of the mosque is shown in the external aspects of architecture. The Chinese characteristics can be seen from outside the mosque. There is no need to go in to examine details of the building. A front view and a side view of the mosque would bear sufficient testimony to its Chinese character. The key to the Chinese look lies in the entrance, the roof and the minaret.

Uniquely, Chinese traditional architecture features timber framework. Thus, the same applies to the mosques built in this type of architectural style. Their appearance resembles temples especially at first sight. The entrance to a mosque is not much different from that to

a temple. The mosque entrance is neither lofty nor arched as is the case in some other parts of the world. Chinese architecture highlights the horizontal element rather than the vertical. Buildings are designed in such a way as to stress the visual impact of their width.

Like the entrance, the minaret in this type of mosques resembles the pagoda in a Buddhist temple. (Figure 3) In China, minarets do not necessarily mean tall, slender towers.



Figure 3. Pagoda-like minaret of Chengjiao Mosque, Linxia

Next is the roof. The distinctiveness lies in the roof of the prayer hall which is given a special treatment. Consideration is given to the possibility that extension of the prayer hall will be needed with the passage of time. A special design of the roof – joint gable roof – is used to facilitate the extension of the prayer hall when required¹². A joint gable roof would be easier for the building to support than a flat roof topping a huge structure. Apart from being

¹² Tao, Shi. "The national culture and spirit in Chinese Islamic Architecture." Paper presented at The Academic Committee of International Conference on Architecture and Local Culture & ASC 2001 Annual Convention organized by Architectural Society of China, Beijing.258.

more functional than a flat roof, a joint gable roof is more aesthetic too. It gives a wave-like silhouette. (Figure 4)



Figure 4. Joint gable roof of Najiahu Mosque, Ningxia

In Chinese traditional architecture, it is common to find zoomorphic ornaments at the end of roof ridges. The mythological figures erected on roofs are believed to be able to ward off evil. Interestingly, the same is found in Chinese-style mosques. (Figure 5) However, such zoomorphic ornaments seem to contradict with the Islamic teaching of no representation of human or animal form. Various reasons are offered to explain the presence of these ornaments on mosque roof ridges. First, Muslims were not aware that the practice was not against Islamic teachings. Second, the practice was so common in Chinese culture that it was difficult for Muslims to resist it. In any case, some Muslims thought of ways to go about it. One way was to do away with the eyes of the figures. As it is a Chinese belief that the eyes of a being give life to the whole body, a figure without eyes is not considered as a being. Another method was to employ artistic skill so as to make the sculpture look like a figure when it was viewed from far, but, in fact it constituted a floral pattern when viewed from near. After all, it is not known exactly why zoomorphic ornaments are found on mosque roofs while the mosque proper is rid of any figurative art. Nevertheless, some Chinese-style mosques seem to be able to go against the norm. Zoomorphic ornaments are not found on their roof ridges.



Figure 5. Zoomorphic ornaments on roof ridge in East Great Mosque, Jining

3.4. Landscape elements

The third characteristic of Chinese-style mosques is shown in the landscape elements, including moon platforms, step units, monumental gateways, moon gates, screen walls and garden architecture. These elements are very common in Chinese traditional architecture, e.g. imperial buildings, temples and stately residences. Undoubtedly they add a lot of Chinese flavor to the mosques.

Moon platform and step units. (Figure 6) A moon platform is an open space, paved and raised, in front of the prayer hall. It serves multiple functions. It becomes an additional prayer area when the prayer hall cannot accommodate all who come to join the congregational prayer. It may be the venue for fast-breaking or some other community events. As the moon platform is a raised area, it is flanked by step units.

Monumental gateway. (Figure 7) It is usually constructed as a row of roofed pillars.¹³ At other times, it may not be roofed. It is erected to mark the entrance to the prayer hall.

Moon gate. (Figure 8) It is a circular entrance creating the sense of entering a special place. The circle is a symbol of perfection. It also represents the full moon, signifying happiness.

¹³ Guo, Qinghua. *A Visual Dictionary Chinese Architecture* (Australia: The Images Publishing Group Pty Ltd., 2002), 61.



Figure 6. Moon platform and step units of East Great Mosque, Kaifeng



Figure 7. Monumental gateway in Great Mosque of Xi'an



Figure 8. Moon gate in Crane Mosque, Yangzhou



Figure 9. Screen wall in Great Mosque, Tianjin

Screen wall. (Figure 9) It is a free-standing wall, placed inside or outside the main entrance of the mosque complex: outside as a domain marker, inside as a windbreak and to block vision.¹⁴

Garden architecture. (Figure 10) It is a prominent feature of Chinese traditional architecture. Being man-made landscape with natural scenery, it reminds man of nature. For example, flowing water is an important element of it. The mosque despite its nature as a place of worship also embraces the idea of garden architecture. Perhaps, this can reflect the humane concern for visitors to the mosque: to provide a pleasant and relaxing environment for the faithful who comes to perform prayers.

All the six landscape elements in this type of mosques, namely, moon platforms, step units, monumental gateways, moon gates, screen walls and garden architecture are common in Chinese traditional architecture. To Chinese, they are not something special. Their adoption in the mosque architecture reinforces the Chinese nature of the mosque.



Figure 10. Garden architecture of the Great Mosque of Xi'an

Besides, there is one more feature special to the Chinese-style mosques: the verandah. (Figure 11) It is a roofed space extended from the prayer hall. Chairs are provided there so that the elderly can take a rest after praying. In some cases, the ceiling and the walls of the verandah are well-decorated.

3.5. Interior Decorative Arts

The fourth characteristic of the Chinese-style mosques is shown in the interior decorative arts. Broadly speaking, it comprises paintings, carvings and calligraphy. As the prayer hall is the focus of attention, it is the most decorated place of the mosque.

3.6. Colored paintings

As this type of mosques is built mainly of wood, decorative paintings are done on wood in different parts of the prayer hall such as the ceiling, beams, brackets, columns, walls, doors. Designs are mainly vegetal (Table 5) and geometric with the use of bright colors. There are five most favored colors: green, white, yellow, blue, red.

¹⁴ Ibid, 90.



Figure 11. Verandah of Southern Great Mosque, Shenyang

Plant	Symbolic meaning
Peony	Good fortune
Lotus	Purity, perfection
Chrysanthemum	Longevity, quiet life
Plum Blossom	Perseverance, endurance
Bamboo	Resilience, integrity
Orchid	Moral excellence. Beauty for women.
	Note: In Chinese culture, flowers are full of symbolic meanings. Plum blossom, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum are called “the four gentlemen”. Plum blossom (Winter), peony (Spring), lotus (Summer) and chrysanthemum (Autumn) are referred to as “Flowers of the four seasons”.

Table 5. Plants and their symbolic meanings in Chinese tradition

Take the example of the Great Mosque of Xi’an. It is rich in colored paintings. The entire ceiling of the prayer hall is covered by 600 different painted panels. (Figure 12) They are all floral motifs, drawn in bright colors such as green, blue and yellow. Colored paintings are also found on the wood panels lining the wall of the prayer hall. The themes of the paintings include grasses and different kinds of flowers like chrysanthemum, lily and peony. Wood columns at the verandah display the same kind of paintings. The design is a lotus motif in gold color.



Figure 12. The ceiling of Great Mosque of Xi’an: 600 different painted panels



3.7 Carving

The second kind of decorative art is carving. It is done on different materials: wood, stone and brick. Like the case in wood paintings, designs are vegetal and geometric. Carvings are commonly found in windows, doors, mihrab, minbar, columns, screen walls, etc. They are usually not colored. A case study of Hongshuiquan Mosque, which is known for its superb carving of wood and brick, is provided below.

Hongshuiquan Mosque (Figure 13&14) is located in the northeastern part of Qinghai Province, close to the provincial capital, Xining. (Map 2) It was first built in the Ming Dynasty and was expanded subsequently. Its present form was completed in the mid-eighteenth century during the Qing Dynasty. That is, what is seen in the mosque today can be traced back to at least 250 years ago.



Map 2. Location of Hongshuiquan Mosque



Figure 13. Hongshuiquan Mosque

The mosque is situated in a rural environment, occupying an area of 6,000 sq.m. It is a Chinese-style mosque, but Buddhist and Taoist influences are evident. The major structures include the screen wall, the stately entrance, the minaret and the prayer hall. In each of these structures, the ornamentation is amazing.

The screen wall is an exemplary of brick carving. (Figure 15) Patterns are numerous and mainly vegetal. Designs include pine, plum blossom, chrysanthemum, sun flower, grape and cabbage. One of the works on the screen wall is especially well-known. 'It is a carving work of hexagonal floral motifs, each motif being different from one another (Figure 16)'



Figure 14. Overall view of Hongshuiquan Mosque

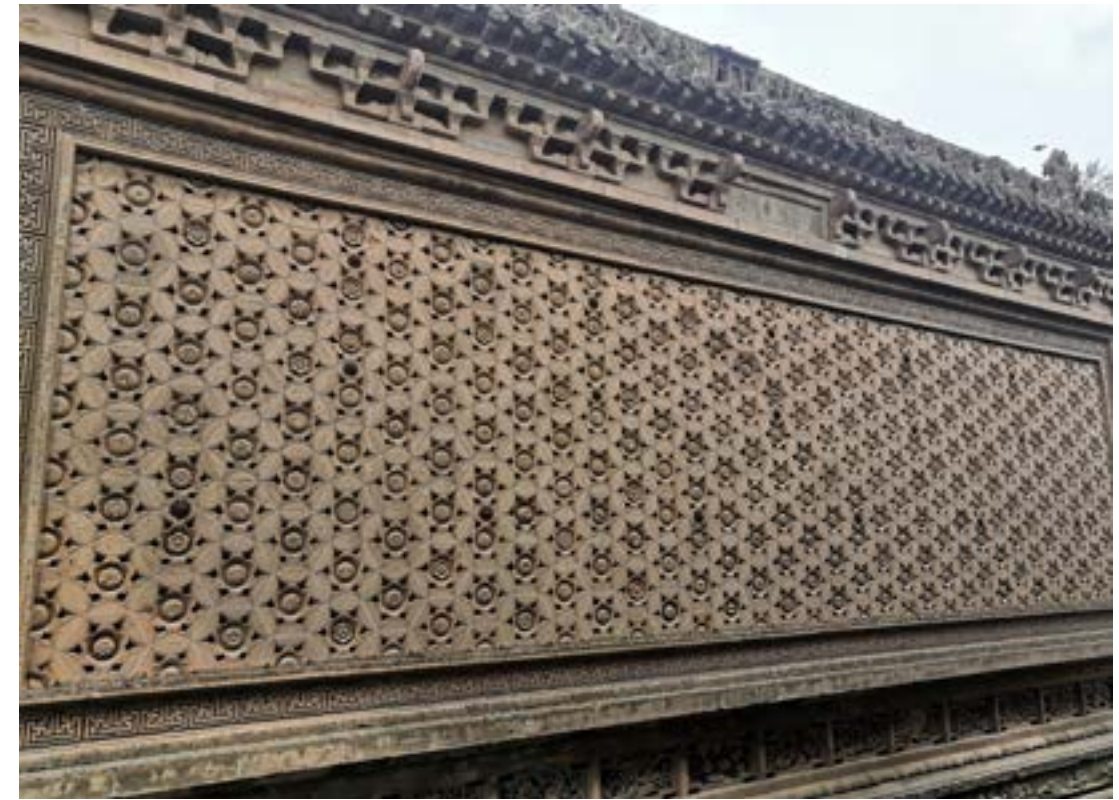


Figure 16. Hexagonal floral motifs on the screen wall



Figure 15. Screen wall of Hongshuiquan Mosque



Figure 17. Stately entrance of Hongshuiquan Mosque

Like the screen wall, the stately entrance is rich in brick carving. (Figure 17) In addition to the great variety of floral designs (Figure 18), geometric patterns are used as well. Something special: one of the brick walls is inset with a wood carving work of grape design. (Figure 19)



Figure 18. Brick carving at the stately entrance

Next is the three-storeyed pagoda-like minaret. (Figure 20) Here it is a combination of brick carving and wood carving. Brick carving works are found on the first storey. (Figure 21) The themes include plum blossom, orchid, chrysanthemum and bamboo as well as geometric patterns. On the upper two stories is wood carving done on doors and windows with geometric patterns. (Figures 22&23)



Figure 19. (left) Brick wall inset with wood carving of grape design

Figure 20. (right) Pagoda-like minaret of Hongshuiquan Mosque



Figure 21. Brick carving of bamboo and chrysanthemum at the minaret

Lastly is the prayer hall (Figure 24) which demonstrates the widest array of carving work, again, using brick and wood. (Figures 25&26) Lining the walls of the prayer hall are carved wood panels. So are the doors. Perhaps, the *crème de la crème* of the ornamental works in the prayer hall is the *zaojing*, which is a piece of intricate wood carving in the shape of a semi-opened umbrella hung on the ceiling. (Figure 27) Something unique is also found on the outside. A brick carving work of Arabic calligraphy is erected on one side of the prayer hall. (Figure 28)

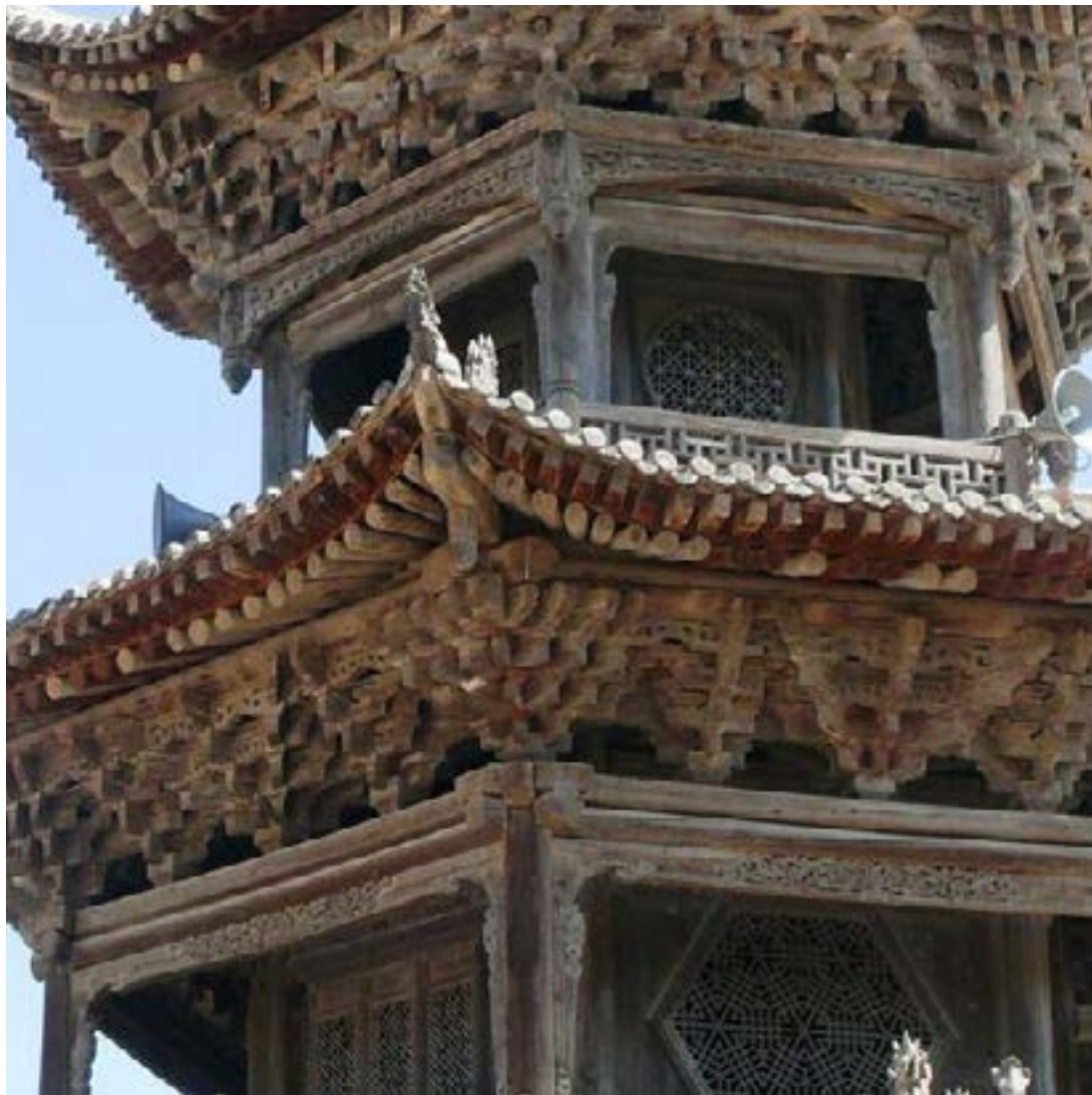


Figure 22. Wood carving in geometric patterns on windows at the minaret



Figure 23 Wood carving in geometric patterns on doors at the minaret



Figure 24. Prayer hall of Hongshuiquan Mosque



Figure 25. Brick carving at the entrance to the prayer hall



Figure 26. Wood carving on doors of the prayer hall

The extremely rich variety of design patterns used in Hongshuiquan Mosque is extraordinary. Though the dominant designs are vegetal and geometric, rather unexpectedly, a number of figurative forms are also found. They include a dragon, phoenix, unicorn, rabbit, rat, fish and some others. (Figure 29) Most of these figures relate to the Chinese tradition, thus reflecting the strong influence of Chinese culture on Muslims there. Another bold expression of non-Muslim influence is the erection of *kasla* (Sanskrit, a symbol of auspiciousness in Buddhism) on the roofs of the mosque. (Figure 30) While the presence of these elements in mosque decoration is rare, it could be explained by the multi-ethnicity of the region where the mosque is situated.



Figure 27. Zaojing

Hongshuiquan Mosque is known for the excellent craft demonstrated in its wood carving and brick carving. The works are left in their original color, giving a sense of simplicity and elegance. The mosque is one of the best-preserved mosques in the northwest of China. It has been listed as a relic at the provincial level.



Figure 28. Brick carving in Arabic calligraphy and floral design at the outside of the prayer hall

3.8 Calligraphy

The third type of decorative art is calligraphy. It includes both Arabic calligraphy and Chinese calligraphy. (Figures 31&32) Though different in form, both kinds of calligraphy share the same themes of writing: *tawheed*, *basmalah*, verses of the Qur'an and sayings of the Prophet (Peace be upon him). Calligraphic works are not only displayed in prayer halls but also in other eye-catching locations inside mosques, e.g. on screen walls. In the prayer hall, calligraphic works are usually displayed in the *mihrab* area, and on columns or panels in the front of the hall. Calligraphy has a long history in China. Chinese love calligraphy as much as, if not more than, Muslims love it. When the two forms of calligraphy meet, the Arabic script is so heavily influenced by the Chinese mode that it evolves to be the Sini script which knows no parallel in the Muslim world. The Sini script is not one. It has different forms. One of them is Arabic written in a square shape positioned like a diamond. This form of Sini script is commonly used in column couplets at prayer halls. Arabic is written from right to left, but in column couplets, it is written vertically. The Sini script is an artistic feat of Chinese Muslims.



Figure 30. (right) Kasla on the roof of the stately entrance.

Figure 29. (left) Brick carving of rabbits and cabbage

At the end of this section of the paper, attention is drawn to the *minbar* of the Chinese-style mosques. It is one of the most decorated parts of the prayer hall. Much creativity is shown in the diversity of its designs. Carving is common. Colors are varied. (Figures 33&34)



Figure 31. (left) Arabic calligraphic in column couplets and on hanging plaques at South Great Mosque, Tianjin



Figure 32. (right) Chinese calligraphy in column couplets of Dongguan Mosque, Luoyang

3.9 Mixed-style

Interestingly, this category includes both the oldest mosques in China and the newest. The oldest is the ancient mosques which were built in the early history of Islam in China, prior to the Ming Dynasty. The newest refers to those built in the last thirty years or so.

a) Oldest Mosques

Unlike the mosques built in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, those erected earlier did not adopt the prevailing Chinese architectural style at that time. They had their own way. The difference is mainly shown in four aspects: building structure, spatial organization, architectural form and decorative details. Perhaps the most noticeable difference was the employment of masonry instead of using the uniquely Chinese timber framework. As to the spatial organization, it was open plan instead of the Chinese symmetric layout along the axis. Exotic architectural forms like arched doorway might be used as was the case in Qingjing Mosque, Quanzhou. (Figure 35)



Figure 33. Minbar of Northern Great Mosque, Cangzhou

Muslims in China at that time were mostly traders from Arabia, Persia and Central Asia. Their stay in the Far East was temporary for the sake of their business. When building the mosques in China, they looked for inspiration from their homeland. This would explain the exotic style of the mosques built in this era. Unfortunately, many of these ancient mosques were destroyed over the centuries. Those which still exist today are very limited in number. As one route by which Islam spread to China was the maritime Silk Road, all the existing mosques built in this early era are located on the southeast coast where are situated the major ports which once had close trading links with Arabia. Four of them are well-known: Huaisheng Mosque in Guangzhou, Qingjing Mosque in Quanzhou, Phoenix Mosque in Hangzhou and Crane Mosque in Yangzhou.

However, these ancient mosques which have survived to this modern era are not entirely exotic in style. Rather, they are in mixed style. Why is it so? A close look at these mosques would provide the answer. Yes, these ancient mosques have survived to this modern era, but they are not intact. What is seen today is not their original state. It is the result of rebuilding. Take the example of Huaisheng Mosque in Guangzhou. (Figure 36) Known for its distinctive tower-like minaret, it is believed to be the very first mosque in China, built in early Tang Dynasty. Its present state is the result of several rebuilding and restoration over the centuries, the last major operation being in 1935. As the minaret is the only structure built in an exotic style, it would probably be the single part of the mosque surviving today since its construction back in the Tang Dynasty.



Figure 34. Minbar of Xigong Mosque, Luoyang

For centuries the minaret had been the tallest building in Guangzhou, dominating its skyline. The freestanding minaret, a round brick tower in simple terms, is unique even in entire China. It is a thick cylindrical masonry shaft sitting on a stone base, tapering up with a balcony where the call to prayer used to be performed. Inside the minaret, two intertwined staircases give access to the balcony, and are expressed on the exterior with windows that spiral up the tower. It is remarkable that the two intertwined staircases represent a structural feat not seen in China prior to the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The use of the technique in Huaisheng Mosque means the lending of new ideas to Chinese architecture. It is said to have influenced the erection of Buddhist pagodas built of brick at a later time.

Another example is Phoenix Mosque in Hangzhou. (Figure 37) It was first built in the Tang Dynasty, but was destroyed in the Song Dynasty and rebuilt in the Yuan Dynasty. The prayer hall of brick is the oldest building extant. The plan is a rectangle composed of three bays across, each bay being nearly square. In each bay, brick corbels are used to support a dome above, upon which is set a Chinese-style roof that crowns the whole structure. The central bay has an octagonal roof, pyramidal in shape with two sets of eaves. Each of the side bays has an hexagonal roof, also pyramidal in shape. The roofs are covered with convex and concave tiles. Features like large wall space on the entrance façade, wide use of arches and domes, lantern-like structures over domes all illustrate a strong Central Asian influence. However, the use of Chinese-style roofs upon domes give a familiar, indigenous appearance.



Figure 35. Arched doorway of Qingjing Mosque, Quanzhou

b) Recent Mosques

Like other religions in China, Islam suffered a serious setback during the ten-year-long Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). All religions were suppressed to the utmost extent. Gradually the tide turned. The turning point came in 1978 when the government started to embrace reforms and open up the country in its modernization drive. At the same time, religious control was relaxed. After being denied religious freedom for years, Muslims make full use of their new-found and, in a sense, still limited freedom. Since 1978, new mosques have emerged all over the country. These new mosques are not repetitions of the old. They carry new styles. They would make their own mark in history.



Figure 36. Huaisheng Mosque, Guangzhou

37. Phoenix Mosque, Hangzhou

This new generation of mosques shares three common elements despite the diversity of their appearance: the green dome, the crescent and the tall minarets¹⁵. (Figures 38) These three together constitute the signature mark of a contemporary-style mosque. They are recognized by both Muslims and non-Muslims as symbols of Islam. Their prominent use could be considered as an expression of identity on the part of Muslims who are too eager to do so after the long span of suppression. As to the interior decoration of these new mosques, it is far less elaborate than the old ones. While paintings and carvings are rare, calligraphy is still common. In few cases, chandeliers may be used to give a sense of grandeur. Overall, the tone is simplicity.

¹⁵ Ding, Kejia. *Arts of Hui Muslim in China* (Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press, 2008), 63.

In this second category of mosque architecture in China, it is interesting to note that both the old and the new seek inspiration from the Muslim land from where Islam reached China. The difference lies in the reason. For those Muslims who erected the earliest mosques in China, it was natural that they sought inspiration from home. They were pioneers who ventured to this part of the world. Because of their endeavor, the seed of Islam was planted in this faraway land and grew to become a tree after centuries. Now this tree tries to reassert itself by re-anchoring its roots after being shaken violently during lengthy periods of stormy weather. Besides, the Islamic revival in the international scene also prompts Muslims to go back to their roots. They feel a sense of urgency in reasserting their Islamic identity. Amazingly, crossing a time interval of over 1,000 years, the psyche of the Muslim pioneers converges with that of the present Muslims. They make the same imprint in the mosque: prominence of an exotic element in basically local architecture.

c) Uyghur style

Located in the far northwest of China, Xinjiang is the homeland of Uyghurs. The province is huge, accounting for one-sixth of the country's territory. It is at the heart of the Silk Road, linking China with Central Asia. Close to the Muslim neighbors in the west, Uyghurs started to embrace Islam in the tenth century. Slowly from west to east, the region completed its Islamization in the seventeenth century. Since then, Uyghurs have remained zealous followers of Islam. Mosques are erected all over Xinjiang with a much greater degree of density than in any other province of China. As mentioned earlier, not only is its mosque/population proportion the highest in China, but it also ranks among the top in the entire Muslim world.

As a people of the Silk Road, Uyghurs were under the influence of different cultures over the centuries, including Chinese, Indian, Central Asian, Persian. As a result of this diverse, multicultural history, Uyghurs built their mosques in a distinct style. Mosques in Xinjiang display art forms of which parallels are absent in other parts of China. Their beauty is unique.



Figure 38. (left) Great Mosque of Shadian, Yunnan



Figure 39. (right) IdKah Mosque in Kashgar, Xinjiang

Mosques in Xinjiang are distinguished by their richly-decorated domes, tall & slender minarets and arched doorways. (Figures 39&40&41) Central Asian influence is predominant. Ornamentation includes paintings, carvings, plaster work and the use of colored glaze. Decorative patterns range from geometric shapes to flowers and fruits. Fruit patterns are special to Xinjiang. While vegetal motifs can be found in different places, this is not the case for fruit patterns. Xinjiang is known for the abundance of fruits. No wonder that fruits such as pomegranate, sweet almond become the theme of Uyghur art works.

Mosques are gems in the desert. Amin Mosque in Turfan, an oasis in the east of Xinjiang, is known for its round-shaped, tapering minaret built of bricks that form intricate geometric patterns. (Figure 42) Despite its simplicity, it exudes an air of elegance. Again, its simplicity renders it so much in harmony with the surrounding desert environment.



Figure 40. Minaret and Mosque of Afaq Khwaja Maza Complex, Kashgar



Figure 42. Amin Mosque in Turfan, Xinjiang

Figure 41. Wood column of High-Low Mosque, Kashgar

CONCLUSION

The three stylistic categories of mosque architecture shed light on how diverse the image of mosques can be in China and why they are so different. Beyond the diversity in style, the fundamental Islamic principles would bring about some commonalities shared by all the mosques such as the use of vegetal motifs, geometric patterns and Arabic calligraphy in their ornamentation. To sum up, it is diversity in unity and unity in diversity.

Despite efforts to treat each of the three categories equally well, the availability of information fails such an aspiration. Chinese-style mosques are much more written about than the other two categories. As a result this paper seems to give more emphasis to that category. However, it is not intended to be so.

Lastly, like what is said in the beginning of this paper, architecture is closely related with people; mosques are but a reflection of Muslims. The mosque architectural style in China tells the story of Muslims there. If the mosque architecture is better known, so will the Muslims be. In both fields, there are vast territories to be explored.

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