

# MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE

PRESENT ISSUES AND FUTURE IDEAS

عمارة المسجد:

قضايا الحاضر و أفكار المستقبل



Editors

Prof. Mashary A. Al Naim | Dr. Hani M Al Huneidi | Dr. Noor Hanita Abdul Majid



المركز البحثي الإسلامي  
Abou El-Fotoh Award



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## CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgment</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>xv</i>
<b>FUTURE MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE DESIGN AND FUNCTION REGIONAL DESIGN OF MOSQUE</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>THE RELEVANCY OF MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE IN A MULTI-FAITH COUNTRY: CHINA AS A CASE</b> Sumarni Ismail Liu Yuzhou Nayeem Asif Azmal bin Sabil	<b>5</b>
<b>MOSQUE AS THE INTEGRAL PART OF THE CONTEXT AND NATURE: CULTURAL MAPPING OF SULTANATE PERIOD IN DELTA BENGAL</b> Dr. Sajid Bin Doza	<b>15</b>
<b>THE DIMINISHING OF INDIGENOUS ARTISTIC TRADITION IN THE DECORATIVE ARTS OF THE MOSQUES IN <i>DUNIA MELAYU</i></b> Harlina Md Sharif	<b>23</b>
<b>SACRED COMMUNITY ASSETS: PLANNING FAITH SPACES FOR FUNCTIONAL, UNIVERSAL, AND FUTURE-READY MOSQUES IN SINGAPORE</b> Muhammad Helmi Abdul Mutallif Syazwani Rauzan	<b>45</b>
<b>THE MOSQUE OF TOMORROW</b> Rafee Hakky, Ph.D	<b>65</b>



<b>MOSQUE ARCHITECTURAL SPACE AND BOUNDARIES</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>THE REVIVAL OF COURTYARD CONSOLIDATION IN MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE</b> Islam Elghonaimy Dalia Eldardiry	87
<b>THE RAY OF LIGHT MOSQUE DESIGN OF A MOSQUE FOR MEN AND WOMEN</b> Co Govers	105
<b>AN EVALUATION OF PRAYING SPACES IN SHOPPING MALLS: THREE CASE STUDIES FROM RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA</b> Mayman Almayman	123
<b>HAS MOSQUE DESIGN REALLY DEVELOPED? NOTES ON THE HIDDEN COMPLEXITIES OF MOSQUES' ARCHITECTURAL BRIEF</b> Dr. Yasser Megahed	139
<b>HOW CHILDREN USE SPACES IN THE <i>MASJID</i>?</b> Aniza Abu Bakar Zur Atiqa Zulkifely Noor Hanita Abd Majid Mohd Burhan Ibrahim	155
<b>PHYSICAL DIMENSION OF <i>MASJID</i> – TOWARDS CHILDREN FRIENDLY <i>MASJID</i></b> Aniza Abu Bakar Zur Atiqa Zulkifely Noor Hanita Abd Majid Mohd Burhan Ibrahim	175
<b>SPATIAL PLANNING FOR NON-MUSLIM ACCESS IN A <i>MASJID</i></b> Maryam Ilhami Amran Asiah Abdul Rahim	189
<b>THE CLEANLINESS AND PURITY OF ABLUTION AND TOILET AREA IN <i>MASJID</i>: AN ANALYSIS OF USERS' UNDERSTANDING AND BEHAVIOUR</b> Siti Hanisah Abdullah Asiah Abdul Rahim	199



<b>COMMUNITY MOSQUES IN URBAN CENTRES</b>	<b>211</b>
<b>GRAND MOSQUE AS A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN THE TRADITIONAL CITY CASE STUDY: BURAYDAH, QASSIM, KSA</b> Moustafa Gh. Abdou	215
<b>BRITISH MUSLIMS AND THE 21ST CENTURY MOSQUE</b> Samie I. Kayani	237
دراسة تحليلية للدراسات المعنية بالضوابط الشرعية لعمارة المساجد أحمد بن رشدي طومان	247
<b>MOSQUE AS A SOCIAL CULTURAL PLACE FROM WOMB TO TOMB</b>	<b>285</b>
<b>THE CHANGING ROLES OF THE FUTURE MOSQUES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN MALAYSIA</b> Azim A. Aziz Mohamad Haziq Zulkifli	289
<b>GRAND MOSQUES IN ISLAMIC HISTORY: ARE THEY THE MODEL?</b> Abeer Allahham	323
<b>MOSQUES AS A LIVING ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE</b>	<b>339</b>
<b>MOSQUE DESIGN BETWEEN ICONICITY AND RECEPTIVENESS</b> Marwa Kamal Doaa M. Helal Rania Ismail Ahmaad Eltaweel	343
<b>ARCHITECTURE GALLERIES IN MUSEUMS: THE FUTURE</b> Dr. Heba Nayel Barakat Nurul Iman Rusli Muhammad Syukri Mohd Shairi	361
<b>MOSQUE AS “HOUSE OF GOD” AND AS “HOUSE OF COMMUNITY”: AN INQUIRY INTO ADAPTIVE REUSE OF AN ABANDONED MOSQUE IN PAKISTAN</b> Syed Hamid Akbar Koenraad Van Cleempoel	383







CONTENTS

<b>MOSQUE AS LIVING ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE</b> Abdul-Malik Abdul-Azeez Abiodun	401
<b>MOSQUE AND COMMERCIAL URBAN NEIGHBORHOOD</b>	<b>417</b>
<b>INTEGRATION, SEGREGATION, OR FRAGMENTATION? JEDDAH CONTEMPORARY MOSQUES IN THE CONTEXT OF PUBLIC PLACES</b> Dr. Mona Helmy	421
<b>UNIVERSAL DESIGN</b>	<b>439</b>
<b>INCLUSIVE BUILT ENVIRONMENT FOR MALAYSIAN HERITAGE <i>MASJID</i></b> Nur Amirah Abd Samad Izawati Tukiman Asiah Abdul Rahim Samini Omar	443
<b>INNOVATIVE REHABILITATION OF OLD MOSQUES</b>	<b>459</b>
<b>GUIDELINES FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF HISTORIC MOSQUES</b> Hossam Mahdy, Ph.D	463
<b>INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN SPIRITUAL CONTEMPLATION</b>	<b>479</b>
<b>MIZWALAH TAHA: TOWARDS THE REVITALIZATION OF TRADITIONAL MOSQUES ARTEFACTS</b> Syed Kamarulzaman Ibnor Azli Ibrahim	483
<b>APPROPRIATE DAYLIGHTING SOURCES DESIGN FOR SPIRITUAL SPACES IN SAUDI ARABIA</b> Aisha Alabdulazeem Ahoud Al Bat'hi Reem Al Ba'adi Fuad H. Malick	503
<b>IS SERENITY THE SOULS OF MOSQUES?</b> Ayman M Ismail Husam Bakr Khalil Aya Mostafa	523





<b>ACOUSTICAL PERFORMANCE IN MALAYSIAN MOSQUES: REVERBERATION TIME IN THE MAIN PRAYER HALLS</b> Zufar Adzahan Nazli Che Din	539
<b>SUGGESTED FRAMEWORK FOR NOISE ASSESSMENT IN MOSQUES</b> Mostafa J. Sabbagh Ahmed Elkhateeb	549
<b>DIGITAL MOSQUES AND ENVIRONMENT</b>	<b>561</b>
<b>REVIVING THE MISSING HISTORY OF MOSQUES USING THE VIRTUAL USER INTERFACE OF ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION-VUIIC</b> Osama Elrawi	565
<b>INNOVATIVE ISLAMIC AESTHETICS AND PATTERNS</b>	<b>593</b>
<b>ARCHITECTURAL ORNAMENT ON CONTEMPORARY MOSQUE IN MALAYSIA</b> Siti Dalila Mohd Sojak Raja Nafida Raja Shahminan Fadhline Ahmad @ Taufik	597
<b>A STUDY TOWARDS THE ORIGIN OF TERRACOTTA DECORATION OF THE MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE IN BENGAL: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON SHAPE GRAMMAR PRINCIPALS</b> Shafique Rahman Redowan Kabir Kaushik	609
<b>USING REPERTORY GRID TECHNIQUE (RGT) TO ANALYZE THE AESTHETICS OF CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL IMAGES OF MOSQUES</b> Ahmed Agiel Najeeba Kuty	625
<b>THE AESTHETIC OF DECORATION IN MOSQUE: CASE STUDY OF MOSQUE IN MELAKA TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING ITS TRUE FUNCTIONS</b> Norzalifah Zainal Abidin	659





## CONTENTS

<b>BIOPHILIA FOR MOSQUES DESIGNS</b>	693
Mohamed Esmat ElAttar Zainab Nasr Tphoon Fatema Elzahraa Hany Abbas	
<b>INNOVATIVE CRAFTSMANSHIP IN CONSTRUCTION</b>	<b>717</b>
<b>READING GEOMETRY OF TRADITIONAL MOSQUES: SELF-SIMILARITY OF CENTRIC ORDER EMPHASIZING TAWHEED PRINCIPLE</b>	721
Hatem Abdelrahman Fayed	
<b>GREEN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN STRATEGIES AND POLICIES FOR MOSQUES</b>	<b>737</b>
<b>ENERGY AUDIT FOR LOW ENERGY MOSQUE IN HOT ARID CLIMATE INSIDE ASSIUT UNIVERSITY CAMPUS</b>	741
Amr Sayed Hassan Abdallah	
<b>EVALUATION STUDY ON THE INSTALLED PHOTOVOLTAIC PANELS AND THEIR EFFECT ON THE AESTHETIC PERCEPTION AND EVALUATION OF MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE IN AMMAN; LOOKING FOR INTEGRATED SOLUTIONS</b>	753
Hikmat Ali Anwar F Ibrahim Wala'a Al-Qarra	
<b>REPLACING THE MOSQUE STEREOTYPE TO DISPLACE THE ISLAMOPHOBIA CONCEPT</b>	771
Ameera Jaleel Ban Mohammed Sultan	
<b>AN EMPIRICAL CLASSIFICATION OF COST OVERRUN IN INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT OF SAUDI BUILDING CODE</b>	805
Fahad Saud Allahaim Li Liu	
<b>GREEN AND SUSTAINABLE STRUCTURES</b>	<b>835</b>
<b>GREEN AND SUSTAINABLE STRUCTURE OF THE MOSQUE OF AL-IRSYAD SATYA INDONESIA</b>	839
Dr. Ahmad Hairuddin Murtani Saefudin Sardi	





CONTENTS

<b>URBAN ECOLOGY MATRIX TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE MOSQUE</b>	857
Ar. Shabab Raihan Kabir	
<b>VERTICAL GARDEN WALL FOR SUSTAINABLE MOSQUE BUILDING IN HOT DRY CLIMATE</b>	887
Aasem Alabdullatief	
Siddig Omer	
Sultan Alfraidi	
Faisal Alosaimi	
<b>COMMUNITIES AND SUSTAINABLE SYSTEM</b>	<b>899</b>
<b>TOWARDS A VISIBLE AND LOCALLY RELEVANT MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE IN FRANCE</b>	903
Fairouz Benatia	
Sabre Bougrine	
Meriem Chabani	
John Edom	
Rym Hanna Khedjari	







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# THE RELEVANCY OF MOSQUE ARCHITECTURE IN A MULTI-FAITH COUNTRY: CHINA AS A CASE

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## INTRODUCTION

**A**CCORDING to the survey by Pew Research Center for the level of religious diversity in 2010, China was defined as one of the most multi-faith countries all over the world. At present, data shows that some 20 to 40 million Muslims live in China for which the actual numbers are still difficult to obtain. They acknowledged that due to the different origins of Islam in China and the complexity of China's modern national policy, various official and unofficial national identities<sup>1, 2</sup>. Interestingly, Chinese mosque architecture, whether historical or modern, reflects this diversity. This paper investigates the development history of mosque buildings in China<sup>3</sup>. The discussion on historical mosques continues to contemporary times, which presents diversified architectural styles for mosques in China. Especially, unlike the olden days, in the 21st century, modern architectural technology allows clients to choose from a variety of styles and materials when designing mosques to reflect specific versions of Islamic identity.

## HISTORY OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE IN CHINA

In his book, *Chinese Islamic Architecture*, Liu Zhiping divides Chinese Islamic architecture into three periods – the first period: the transplantation period of Islamic architecture, from Tang Dynasty to the end of Yuan



Dynasty, about 700 years; the second period: the climax period of Islamic architecture development, about 500 years from the beginning of Ming Dynasty to the pre-Opium War; and the third period: more than 100 years from the Opium War to the founding of New China. He further divides Chinese Islamic architecture into two systems: one is “*Gongbei*”. *Gongbei* – meaning “dome”, is a term used by the Hui people in Northwest China for an Islamic shrine complex centered on a grave of a Sufi master. The other system is the mosques of Uyghur and other nationalities in Xinjiang<sup>4</sup>. Wang Zhengming divides the process of *Sinicization* of Islam into three stages: the transplantation period of early Islam, which corresponds to the three dynasties of Tang, Song, and Yuan; the change period of Islamic architectural style in the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties; and the third period is the Ming and Qing dynasties<sup>5</sup>. Based on the above ideas, this paper divides Chinese Islamic architecture into the following four historical periods.

### Transplantation Period from the Tang Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty

Although Muslims have entered China since the Tang Dynasty, and have formed settlements and built mosques in Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Hangzhou, Yangzhou, Chang’an, and other cities, the material remains of the Tang and Song Dynasties are very rare. At present, the earliest relics of Chinese Islam are Arabic stone carvings in the Song and Yuan Dynasties. They are mainly distributed in Beijing, Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Hangzhou, and Yangzhou, especially in Quanzhou<sup>6</sup>.

The only buildings left in the Tang Dynasty may be the *Guangta* (minaret) of Huaisheng Mosque in Guangzhou (Figure 1). The mosque is one of the oldest in the world built over 1,300 years ago. It is known for its unusual minaret, the *Guangta* which means lighthouse in ancient Chinese<sup>7</sup>.



**FIGURE 1**

Huaisheng Mosque in Guangzhou.

(Source: <http://catalogue.wellcomelibrary.org/record=b1187734>)

Quanzhou Ashab Mosque was built in 400 years (1009 – 1010) of the Islamic calendar, that is, the second year of the Emperor of Song Dynasty (Figure 2). The mosque is a typical representative of the period when Islam has not yet been localized. Its shape and layout are quite different from traditional Chinese architecture, all of which are made of granite. The existing Mosque was rebuilt in 1310. It has a history of more than 700 years. There are no Chinese characters on the stone carvings of this Yuan Dynasty building, rather all of them are in Arabic<sup>8</sup>.

**FIGURE 2**

Qingjing Mosque Entry.

(Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qingjing\\_Mosque\\_-\\_entry\\_-\\_DSCF8665.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qingjing_Mosque_-_entry_-_DSCF8665.JPG))





In the Yuan Dynasty, the earliest examples of the combination of Islamic brick and stone architecture from Central Asia and West Asia with Chinese-style architecture emerged, such as the arch of the Phoenix Mosque in Hangzhou, and the arch of the mosque in Dingzhou, Hebei, all adopted the architectural style of the Islamic brick arch in the interior and Han-style pavilion at exterior. Chang Qing, an architectural expert of Tongji University, clearly put forward in his article titled “Evolution of Chinese Brick and Stone Vault Architecture in Yuan and Ming Dynasties” that structural and qualitative changes have taken place in Chinese brick and stone vault architecture since Han and Tang Dynasties at the turn of Song and Yuan Dynasties. He mentioned that it originated from the influence of the shape and style of Islamic architecture in Western Regions. It can be seen that the transplantation of Islamic architecture is not only the emergence of mosques with Islamic architectural style in China but also the further promotion of a transformation of brick vaults in China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties<sup>8</sup>.

### The *Sinicization* Period in Ming and Qing Dynasties

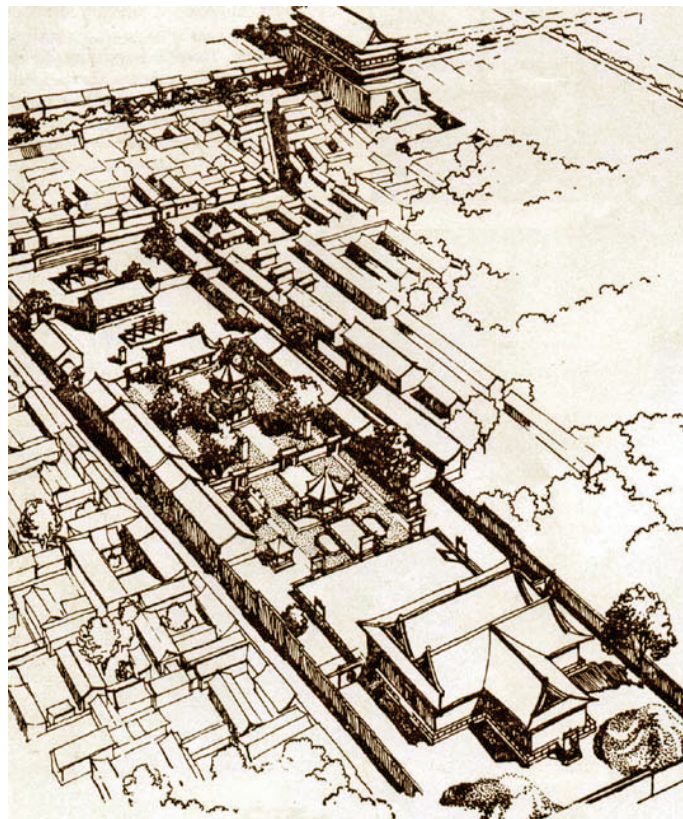
In the early Ming Dynasty, a series of policies prohibiting “Hu clothes, Hu language, and Hu surname” promoted the localization of Muslim immigrants. In Muslim architecture, mosques generally adopt the large roof style of traditional Chinese wood structure as well as a large number of Chinese-style plaque couplets, inscriptions, paintings, and other forms<sup>9</sup>.

Liu Zhiping has discussed the changes in this period in detail in “Chinese Islamic Architecture”. He listed examples of Ming Dynasty, such as Xi’an Huajuexiang Mosque (Figure 3), Hangzhou Zhenjiao Mosque, Beijing Dongsi Mosque, Yunnan Dali Mosque, Shanghai Songjiang Mosque, Gansu Tianshuihou Street Mosque, and so on. For example, Huajuexiang Mosque has no brick hall. The magnificence and solemnity of the courtyard and hall architecture are the rare essences of ancient Chinese architecture. He cited examples of Qing Dynasty architecture, including East Grand Mosque of Jining, Bozhen Mosque of Hebei, Gulou Mosque of Chengdu, Qiaomen Street Mosque of Lanzhou, Zhuxianzhen Mosque of Henan, and so on. It has completely formed a unique Chinese system, and its overall layout is mostly quadrangular courtyard style. It occupies a special position in the history of Chinese architecture, greatly enriching the tradition of ancient Chinese architecture, and has a long history. It is not comparable to the





common types of Buddhist architecture that can be seen in their temples and palaces. Liu Zhiping gave such a high appraisal, mainly because Chinese Islamic architecture not only inherited the shape and style of traditional Chinese architecture but also had many creative applications and developments, such as the collocation of collocated roofs, front curtain and back kiln hall, unconventional plane type and architectural combination, etc<sup>4</sup>. Its innovation and complexity are amazing. It also shows the two-way influence in cultural exchange expressed above, that is, the *Sinicization* of Islamic architecture is not a one-way and passive acceptance process, but a creative and positive adaptation process. The acceptance and development of Chinese Islamic architecture to the form, technique, and form of traditional Chinese architecture is still going on today. The Mingtang Architecture in Lanzhou is one of the best examples.



**FIGURE 3**  
Huajuexiang Mosque.

(Source: [https://archnet.org/sites/3973/media\\_contents/1795](https://archnet.org/sites/3973/media_contents/1795))



## The Declining Period of the Republic of China

Since the late Qing Dynasty, on the one hand, the scale, quality, and artistic level of new mosques have declined due to war and social decline; on the other hand, due to the introduction of Western architectural technology, Chinese mosque buildings have also appeared to adapt reinforced concrete structure. The mosques built in this period are representative of Shanghai Xiaotaoyuan Mosque, Huhhot Mosque, Dongguan Mosque in Xining, Taizi Mosque in Lingwu County, Ningxia, etc.

Shanghai Xiaotaoyuan Mosque, built-in 1930, is the pioneer of modern mosque depicting reinforced concrete buildings. The Hohhot Mosque and Dongguan Mosque in Xining have become a combination of Chinese and Western architectural styles.



**FIGURE 4**

Xiaotaoyuan Mosque.

(Source: [https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berkas:Xiaotaoyuan\\_Mosque.JPG](https://id.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berkas:Xiaotaoyuan_Mosque.JPG))

During the 30 years from the founding of New China to the Cultural Revolution, mosque buildings in China went from decline to destruction due to the overflow of “extreme left” thoughts. Many mosques included in Liu Zhiping’s “Chinese Islamic Architecture” have not survived, such as Jining West Mosque in Shandong Province, Nanda Mosque in Tianjin, Shizuishan Mosque in Ningxia, Weizhou Mosque, Lanzhou, and Linxia Mosques. As the “Cultural Revolution” hard-hit areas of Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai Hui communities, there are only a few mosque buildings left. There are no mosque buildings in Lanzhou and Linxia, only the small-scale mosques in





Yinchuan and Dongguan Mosque in Xining. The Lanzhou Qiaomen Street Mosque, which Professor Liu Zhiping calls “a rare and precious heritage in Chinese architecture”, has “a huge and magnificent scroll shed rarely seen in ancient Chinese architecture”, and “the spirit of connecting the scroll shed with the hall is even rarer”. Now we can only recall it in his book<sup>10</sup>.

The understanding of the period of the overall destruction of this mosque building is very crucial because it is this comprehensive destruction that brings about the style transformation of the mosque building in the next period.

## THE MODERNIZATION OF MOSQUE IN CHINA SINCE THE 1980s

With the end of the Cultural Revolution, religious activities in China have gradually tended to normalize. In the 1980s, the mosques that survived were gradually reopened, and the destroyed mosques were gradually restored and rebuilt, forming the first climax of mosque reconstruction. Limited to the social and economic conditions at that time, most of the rebuilt mosque buildings were relatively simple, not only the construction technology could not be compared with the Ming and Qing Dynasties, but also the construction quality was not up to the mark. As a result, the rebuilt mosques servers for only about 10 to 20 years and then faced reconstruction<sup>8, 11</sup>.

After entering the 21st century, with the further promotion of reform and opening up the market economy, the economic life of the vast majority of Muslims in Northwest China has been greatly improved, and a new round of mosque reconstruction climax appears again. This wave of rebuilding climax is not the “religious fanaticism” seen in some people’s eyes, but the inevitable result of the above historical logic. In the current wave of reconstruction, the crude buildings built in the 1980s are facing gradual replacement by new reinforced concrete buildings, and their architectural styles will show a more diversified orientation; and this trend of development is consistent with the trend of urbanization and modernization in China at that time.

## MOSQUE AND THE LIFE AND MOBILITY OF MUSLIMS IN CITIES

Mosque is the center of Muslim community. It is the place to perform prayers, carry out education, inherit culture, inherit traditions, and gather





people to discuss, settle disputes, help the poor, exchange, and cater for the community. It plays both communal and religious functions and plays an irreplaceable position in the Muslim community. Therefore, in history and reality, where Muslims live together, there will be mosques that serve their communities. Mosques in China are usually integrated with Arab-Islamic culture and Chinese culture<sup>12</sup>. At the same time, they combine regional culture. They are not only the most magnificent and solemn buildings in the community but also the material landmark. They are also spiritual landmarks in the cognitive and classification system of the surrounding Muslims. Mosque creates a homelike environment for the Muslims to experience the love and warmth of their beliefs, and feel the significance and value of life.

According to the trend of population migration, Muslims in China have the characteristics of migration from village to town, town to county, county to central city, central city to metropolis. From the perspective of occupational status of migrants, it is mainly the migration of some regional industrial groups from rural areas or cities to big cities, such as Qinghai Hui, Sala, and Xinjiang Uygur into coastal cities to open restaurants; Henan Mengzhou, Changge and other places Hui migrated to Quanzhou, Guangzhou to operate leather based industry. From the regional analysis of migration, it has the characteristics of migration from inland areas to coastal cities, from western areas to central and eastern areas. Particularly noteworthy is that in recent years, there has been a trend of migration to cities where Muslim activities have existed in history, although the early Muslims communities had generally declined in the planned economy era<sup>11</sup>.

There are two reasons for the migration mentioned above characteristics: one is the attraction of Mosque cities to Muslims; the other is the prosperity of urban commerce in developed areas, the developed market, and the humanization of policies, which have a “pull” effect. Traditionally, there are mosques and after the arrival of new immigrants, they will quickly construct their social network through mosques, share the social capital formed with mosques as the center, and provide the basic network support for immigrants to enter the city. And cities with developed markets, open policies and prosperous commerce can attract Muslim businessmen to enter the industry in a short time, thus rapidly gathering a certain number of people to build a harmonious religious community.





## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Over the past 10 years, the style of newly built mosques has tended to imitate that of the Middle East region. This trend makes the religious symbols of mosques emphasized but severely separated from the connection of geographical and cultural context. The development of Islam in China cannot be understood as “*Sinicization*”. Firstly, the products of the *Sinicization* of Islamic architecture are the two major Islamic architecture systems in the Mainland and Xinjiang. Secondly, Islamic architecture in the interior of China is not passively accepting and imitating traditional Chinese architectural techniques and styles, but creatively inheriting and developing them. Thirdly, the *Sinicization* of Islamic architecture has its distinct characteristics of the times and changes synchronously with the development of Chinese society as a whole. The conclusion is that it is unrealistic to require Chinese Islamic architecture to remain in the era of big roof architecture in the Ming and Qing Dynasties without renewal today when traditional Chinese architecture is declining, and modern architecture is developing towards diversification.

Also, is there an architectural style called “Arab style”? The answer is “No”. Islam is recognized as a world religion, with a variety of localized styles; in the field of Islamic art, the most representative is the art of architecture and calligraphy. Therefore, “Islamic Architectural Art” does not mean “Arab Architectural Art”. In the contemporary Arab countries, there is no unified “Arab architecture”. Therefore, the assertion of “building an Arab-style mosque” is meaningless in itself. If there is a more unified style of Islamic art, it is completely normal for Chinese Islamic architecture to inherit, develop, and transform this style, which adds not only new content to the treasure house of Chinese culture, but also contributes new content to the world Islamic culture.

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