

REHABILITATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE IN CHINA: THE EXAMPLE OF THE NINGXIA HUI AUTONOMOUS REGION

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Abstract: The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, located in North-western China, has the highest concentration of Hui Muslims in China: around 34% of the local population is Hui Muslim. Following the anti-religious campaigns of the communist regime and the wide destruction of the Cultural Revolution, Hui Muslims began gradually to reclaim their Muslim heritage in the late 70's. A major aspect of the rediscovery of their Islamic heritage was the Rehabilitation and reconstruction of Islamic Architectural buildings. As of today, Ningxia counts 4,500 mosques and other religious buildings. The present article seeks to introduce the architectural tendencies at play in this reconstruction, specifically the role of competing Arabic and Chinese influences.

Keywords: Ningxia, China, Islamic architecture, Hui Muslim, reconstruction

Located in northwestern China, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region is a mountainous province ranking among the smaller provinces in China, both in terms of population (6.25 million) and area (66.000 km²). According to the indicators of income and life expectancy, Ningxia is well below the national

average; it is also one of China's less industrialized regions. At the heart of the Loess Plateau (1050 meters), this region is one of the areas whose ecology and environmental capacity are the most vulnerable in China.

Ningxia has the highest concentration of Hui Muslims in China: around 34% of the local population is Hui Muslim, which are the largest Muslim minority in China, and the third largest after the Zhuang minority and the Manchu minority. The Hui are as urbanized as their fellow citizens of Han nationality, and are similar in terms of language (Hui speak a local dialect of Mandarin) and their physical appearance. However, they respect Islamic dietary laws and reject pork consumption. In addition to food taboos, an important marker of identity is their architecture: cities, neighborhoods and streets inhabited were a large concentration of Hui can be found are easily identifiable. Strong identity symbols, such as posters and signs announcing halal products, can be seen, of which the most important are undoubtedly the architectural markers, including religious buildings.

Following the anti-religious campaigns of the late 50's and the wide destruction of the Cultural Revolution - both human and material -, Hui began gradually reclaiming their Muslim heritage in the late 70's. With the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping, the restoration of Muslim heritage asserted itself more firmly in the 80's (Dillon, 2000). Following the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping, the efforts seeking to restore of their Islamic Heritage asserted themselves more quickly and openly. In the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the speed with which the Muslim Hui reclaimed their environment, including the restoration of the places of worship, the mosques and qubbat is amazing, especially considering that the mosques in Ningxia which survived and remained intact throughout the Cultural Revolution can be counted

on the fingers of one hand.

We argue here that the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the Islamic architectural heritage was mainly possible due to the full reversal of the attitude of regional and national political authorities. Places of worship and other religious architectural objects, which were destroyed by the thousands only in Ningxia, ceased to be hated symbols and even became central elements of governmental urban development projects and plans. As of today, China counts of 35,000 to 40,000 mosques, of which around 4,500 are located in Ningxia, which amounts to one mosque for every 500 Hui Muslims. This rapid restoration of religious buildings, several were rebuilt literally on the ashes of the old buildings, makes it easy to understand why the capital of Ningxia - Yinchuan - is nicknamed the “City of the Phoenix”.

An Islamic architecture of multiple influences

According to Kang Qi, an architecture professor from the University of Ningxia and in charge of a national team currently conducting research on the architectural heritage of the Hui Muslims, this movement of reclaiming the public space by rebuilding old mosques following anti religious campaigns was mostly consistent with previous architectural tendencies, despite the emergence of new foreign influences. Indeed, despite the trauma of the previous demolition campaigns by the Red Guards, the architectural distinctiveness of Hui before and after the Cultural Revolution continues to embody the proximity and even the mix of their two cultural roots. According to Kang Qi, “the traditional Islamic architecture which can be seen in Hui communities, whether it is family homes, mosques or shrines, is a reflection of a unique dialogue between the majority Chinese culture (Han) and the minority Muslim culture (Hui).”

This dual influence can be seen in the construction plan of most Hui mosques, which is in some way similar to Buddhist temples, namely a “square” layout of the buildings. According to this model, the mosque is in fact enclosed and protected from its surrounding by high and large walls. In fact, the only part visible of the mosque to passersby is a high gate (usually facing the east), where large Chinese characters, and occasionally Arabic calligraphic writings, announce the name of the mosque. The gate opens onto an enclosed, more or less large, courtyard and faces the prayer hall, facing west. Secondary buildings are located on the left and right, including apartments of the Imam, the ablutions room, the reception room, and sometimes a classroom, where the basics of religion and Arabic language are taught.

However, if the Chinese mosque can be likened to the Buddhist temple in terms of the layout of its buildings, its location within the community differs radically : the Hui mosque is traditionally located in the heart of the urban community or village, while the Buddhist temple is most often found out of town, tucked away in the mountains or forest. The Chinese mosque, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, thus retains a function that goes beyond a simple place of worship: it is the nerve center of the Hui community, around which houses are arranged in concentric circles. This “centripetal” layout around a religious building is also seen among the Uighurs and other Muslim peoples of China, and is a particularity that significantly distinguishes them from the Han.

Apart from the layout of their buildings, Mosques in Ningxia, like those of China in general, can be divided into three major architectural styles. First, the style that may be the most common, especially in village communities, is called “Traditional Chinese”. In this case, the building is discreet and hardly distinguishable from the houses that surround it : the roofs are of a purely Chinese-

style tiles, the gray or brown walls are quite simple, much like the exterior decorations. In the absence of a minaret, the call to prayer is made directly from the entrance of the prayer room. From the street, only a crescent overlooking the typically Chinese apex indicates that this is a religious building. The Great Mosque of Tongxin, dating from 1791, one of the few Hui mosques to have survived the anti-religious destruction in the region, is one of the classic example of a Traditional Chinese-style mosque, and is the pride of Ningxia Muslims.



The Great Mosque of Tongxin

The second architectural style, known as “Arabic”, is radically different from the first : the walls of white or green porcelain clash with neighboring buildings, as do the high towers and the Middle Eastern domes, visible several blocks away. However, despite this clearly ostentatious style of foreign influence, one can see decorations that undeniably affirm the

linkage of these buildings of Middle Eastern style with their Chinese surroundings. In particular, the presence on the cornices of animalistic representations (including “Chiwen”, a mythical animal similar to a dragon), designed to protect the building from fire, is a sure sign of the Chinese influence.

Finally, the architecture of “mixed style” incorporates elements of the previous two categories of mosques. In this case, the roof, the color of the walls, the courtyard, the presence or absence of a central dome derive their source in turn from the traditional Hui mosque, in turn from the Middle Eastern style. These buildings also borrow its high towers from the Arab-style, which present itself either as a minaret or a dome or as a multi-storey Chinese pagoda. The Great Mosque of the Hui community of Najiahu, dating originally from 1524, was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and was rebuilt in 1984 in a style that clearly combines both Middle Eastern and Chinese influences.

According to our testimonies, these styles reflect the aesthetic preferences of local communities, and the decision to adopt a style of “Arab” or traditional Chinese influence is made by the community itself (or by political authorities in the case of large mosques funded by governments). Every village having its own mosque, a traveller going from north to south Ningxia could admire the whole range and diversity of styles. However, these architectural styles can sometimes be indicative of the adhesion of the community to one of the religious movements present in the Ningxia region, even if such a correlation is not systematic. According to Allès (2009), for example, the rise in the '80s of the Ikhwan current (in Chinese, *Yihewani*), which seeks to differentiate itself from the traditional Sufi currents, is associated with the assertion of Middle Eastern architectural style. This can be explained in particular by the desire of these new currents to

move closer to their Arab brethren, whose Islam is consistently perceived as being more “authentic.” Conversely, more traditional Sufi currents have a certain preference for the Chinese style, more sober and closer to the local practice of Islam.

Qubbat: still the center of Hui religious fervor

If the mosques are the ostentatious aspect of the re-appropriation of public space by Hui Muslims — they even became an integral part of government urban planning projects — the true revival of Islamic religious fervor in Ningxia can be seen far from the cities, in the qubbat (in Chinese: *gongbei*), where are buried the Chinese Sufi saints.

Leading this religious revival movement is the qubbat of *Honggangzi*, located in Wuzhong county, 50 kilometers from the city of Tongxin (the heart of Muslim culture in Ningxia, with 70% Muslim population). This qubbat commemorates the founder of the Sufi current associated with the most influential Khufiyya movement in Ningxia, that of Hongshou Aziz Lin (1852-1937).

Originally from the neighboring province of Gansu, Aziz Lin decided in the early 30's to move to *Honggangzi* - at the time an incredibly arid, barren and uninhabited village, where the acute water shortage makes any agriculture production difficult. Despite persistent droughts, Aziz Lin and his followers established a mosque and an Islamic school, and gradually Muslim worshipers flocked from neighboring regions and joined his current, making it one of the greatest Sufi movements in the region. Built two years after the death of Aziz Lin, in 1939, of *Honggangzi* qubbat soon became the heart of Sufi Islam in Ningxia.



Main building of architectural complex of Honggangzi

The *Honggangzi* qubbat is a large-scale architectural complex, in a style inspired by both Arabic and Traditional Chinese influence, occupying a total area of about 20,000 square meters. Lined with several buildings, including various prayer rooms and study halls, the main and central building of the complex contains the tomb of the founder of the Sufi movement, and the leader of each subsequent generation, as well as the tombs of their immediate family.

Despite the positive relationships between Aziz Lin and the People's Liberation Army during the Civil War, the qubbat was not spared by the destruction of the Cultural Revolution. It was completely destroyed in the 70's and finally rebuilt and enlarged in 1987, under the initiative of the grand-son of the Sufi and current leader of the third generation of the movement, Hongwei Zong.



*The tombs of Chinese Sufi saints
located in the heart of the qubbat*

Although discreet and located in valleys far from the city, this qubbat (there are dozens in Ningxia alone) are busy places, very popular with Muslims of Ningxia and of neighboring provinces alike. Each year, a grand ceremony over seven days is dedicated to the anniversary of the death of Aziz Lin, during which tens of thousands of believers in the Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang and Shaanxi flock in this tiny village to pay their respect to the Sufi leader. This is one of the major Islamic celebrations in the region and in China.

Such activities clash with what can be seen in some of the new large mosques built by government authorities at a great cost: these are not associated to any particular community or any Sufi leader, and in definitive look more like empty and rarely visited museums than places of worship. If these large mosque complexes are a compelling symbol of the radical shift of the public institutions

with regard to the place of religion in the public sphere, they have little meaning for urbanized Muslims Hui, whose loyalty still belongs to the religious current or cult of their ancestral village.

An eclectic reclaiming of public space

Despite attempts of control by the regional government, the reaffirmation of the Hui Muslim identity in the public space of Ningxia has not been uniform or homogeneous : its embodiment depended largely on local communities. The diversity or concurrent architectural styles may seem inconsistent or even contradictory to foreign eyes. However, this plurality of architectural influences that everything seems to oppose is not foreign to the contradiction inherent in the Hui identity, namely a tension between defining themselves as an integral part of the greater Chinese nation, while incorporating elements foreign to the Confucian civilization in order to assert its difference against the ethnic Han majority. This reclaiming of public space reflects the multiplicity of Hui cultural influences, and this is visible in the variety of architectural trends.

In definitive, we can say that the wave of reconstruction of religious buildings since the 80s was powered as much by local Muslim communities than by the initiative of the regional political authorities. Different levels of governments have also implemented measures to preserve and protect the Muslim heritage that escaped past destructions. “It is unfortunate that many old buildings were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, and this reinforces the need to safeguard the Hui heritage in China and Ningxia,” says Kang Qi. Several mosques in Ningxia, such as the central mosque in Yinchuan and the Great Mosque of Tongxin, have been declared heritage buildings and are currently under the protection of the State.

The process of rehabilitation of the Islamic architectural

heritage of Hui Muslims is therefore part of a dual trend, including restoring past traditions (as illustrated by the revival of the Sufi movements) and promoting their entry into modernity - the construction of large mosques funded by public projects and perfectly integrated inside urban development plans, which gives cities of Ningxia a decidedly Islamic character. As such, it is also telling that the fronts of several non-religious buildings in Yinchuan —shops, apartment buildings and even car dealerships — are often decorated with green croissants and Arabic domes. “These are the elements of Muslim and Hui culture,” says Kang Qi, “which has now become an integral part of the modern identity of the city of Yinchuan.”

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