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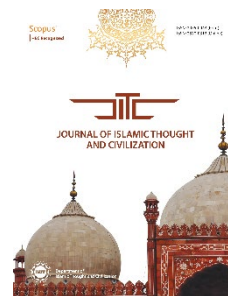
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# Religious Hegemony and Vernacular Mosque Architecture: Investigating Authority Differentials, Intra group Dissonance and Acculturation among Chinese Muslims

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## Abstract

This article engages with the role of sacred architecture as an embodiment of the conflicts, within a Chinese Muslim ethnic minority group, determined by the dispute upon religious hegemony. Vernacular architecture of a minority group has significant socio-cultural implications and can serve as a tool to measure its integration in the mainstream society. Through an ethnographic study focusing upon the Hui, a Muslim minority community of Xi'an, in Communist China and their sacred architecture, it indicates that the architectural archetype of a mosque quite precisely concretizes the religious hegemony, intra group dissonance and acculturative or retentionist trends of Hui community. It demonstrates that certain architectural features, such as the presence or absence of minaret and dome or a Chinese styled roof with carved animals, in the mosque clearly mirror the loci of religious authority of its adherents. It proposes that architectural characteristics can play the role of preservers and charters of cultural identity of a minority group and can equivocally serve as symbols of retention or acculturation in the mainstream society. By applying a socio-architectural approach, it is meant to explore that how mosques architecture in today's China reflects the intra group dissonance of the Hui community and how shifting paradigms of religiously oriented hegemony are working to eradicate the Sino-Muslim historical architectural relics.

**Keywords:** Vernacular architecture; Acculturation; Intra group conflict; Religious hegemony; sacred architecture; Mosque in China

## Introduction

Vernacular architecture of an area has been considered, by the historians, as an embodied representation of the aspirations, tendencies and social preferences of people who inhabited that particular region. By the same token, the sacred architecture summarizes the meaning of the worldview of its adherent community and expresses it in a concise form.<sup>1</sup> Religion can be better understood when its imaginative and symbolic infrastructure is taken into account rather than the cognitive or doctrinal one.<sup>2</sup> The historians of religious architecture have considered the religious edifices as the best tools for the ethnographic study as these structures represent an unbiased extra-temporal account of a religious group of people. Schopen<sup>3</sup> argued that if the history of religions, which was text-bound, had instead been an archaeology of religions "it would have been preoccupied *not* with what small, literate almost exclusively male and certainly atypical professionalised subgroups wrote, but rather, with what religious people of all segments of a given community actually

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<sup>1</sup>Clifford Geertz. "Ethos, World-View and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," *The Antioch Review* 17, no. 4 (1957): 421–37.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Greeley, *Religion as Poetry* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Gregory Schopen, "Burial and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archeology of Religions," *Religion* 17, no. 3 (1987): 193-225., 193.

did and how they lived.” In his study of Borobudur, Paul Mus<sup>4</sup> emphasized the role of architecture as a material representation of the religious doctrines of Buddhism. The relationship of sacred landscape with the cognitive patterns of the inhabitants has been studied by many sociologists and historians of architecture.

The relationship of architectural designs of sacred buildings with the acculturative patterns and authority differentials has been investigated earlier but not in the context of Chinese Muslim minority. For instance, West<sup>5</sup> has interpreted the acculturative patterns of people of northern Plains with reference to the adaptations in the architectural designs. Lehr<sup>6</sup> specifically observed and analyzed the trends of acculturation and incarnation of architectural synthesis in the sacred edifices of Ukraine. In the context of China, the Buddhist sacred architecture has been studied in relevance to the cultural integration.<sup>7</sup> Klaus<sup>8</sup> recently examined the significance and role of religious architecture in a culture of hybrid people (both genetically and socially). Vernacular architecture as an expression of intergroup and intra-group conflict, in the context of Zoroastrian minority of Iran has been investigated by Mazumdar.<sup>9</sup> The change in architectural patterns due to shift in locus of authority has been extensively investigated in Japanese context.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, many scholars have worked on the integration of Islamic architecture with vernacular patterns in the construction of mosques in China. The structure of the mosque specifically with reference to the intra-group conflict of Muslims and the resultant schism has been studied with reference to two mosques of London.<sup>11</sup> Their studies bear a close resemblance to ours as it also aims to reflect the schism of Muslim minority as materialized in the mosque architecture.

### 1.1. Research Questions

This article engages with the role of sacred architecture as an embodiment of the conflicts, within a Chinese Muslim ethnic minority group, determined by the dispute upon religious hegemony. With the new Islamic reform movements and introduction of alternative patterns of religiosity from the Arab countries, the Hui community of China has encountered the issue of authority differentials in religious domain giving rise to the intra group dissonance and the subsequent emergence of many factions amongst them. Mosques being the focal centers of religious congregation, symbolize these social processes in a comprehensive way. Hence this study deals with the following intriguing questions; what are the authority differentials faced by the Muslim minority of China and how do

<sup>4</sup>Paul Mus, *Barabudur: Sketch of a History of Buddhism based on Archaeological Criticism of the Texts* (Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1998).

<sup>5</sup>Carroll Van West, “Acculturation by Design: Architectural Determinism and the Montana Indian Reservations, 1870—1930,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1987): 91–102.

<sup>6</sup>John C. Lehr, “The Ukrainian Sacred Landscape: A Metaphor of Survival and Acculturation,” *Material Culture Review* 29 (January 1989).

<sup>7</sup>Jianchu Xu, Erzi T Ma, Duojie Tashi, Yongshou Fu, Zhi Lu, and David Melick, “Integrating Sacred Knowledge for Conservation: Cultures and Landscapes in Southwest China,” *Ecology and Society* 10, no. 2 (2005): 7.

<sup>8</sup>HD. Klaus, “Hybrid Cultures and Hybrid Peoples: Bioarchaeology of Genetic Change, Religious Architecture, and Burial Ritual in the Colonial Andes,” in *Hybrid Material Culture: The Archaeology of Syncretism and Ethnogenesis* (Center for Archaeological Investigations Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 2013), 207-238.

<sup>9</sup>Sanjoy Mazumdar, and Shampa Mazumdar, “Intergroup Social Relations and Architecture: Vernacular Architecture and Issues of Status, Power, and Conflict,” *Environment and Behavior* 29, no. 3 (1997): 374-421.

<sup>10</sup>William H. Coaldrake, *Architecture and Authority in Japan* (Routledge Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup>John Eade, “Nationalism, Community, and the Islamization of Space in London,” *Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies* 22 (1996): 217-33.

they interrelate with mosque architecture? What are the determinants of intra-group dissonance in Chinese Muslim minority and how do they get reflected in construction patterns of mosques? What symbolic role the vernacular mosque architecture has to play in the socio-cultural lives of Chinese Muslims? Can mosque architecture serve as an indicator of acculturation or deculturation?

## 2. Methodology

This article is based on an ethnographic study examining the conflicts within the Chinese Muslim minority, known as Hui, and its impact on the mosque architecture of today's China. The data for the ethnographic details has been collected through a three years field research conducted in Xi'an, the provincial capital of Shaanxi in the center of China. Xi'an has been chosen for the field trips because it is the proclaimed habitat of the oldest Muslim community in China as Muslims came as ambassadors to the Chinese court for first time in 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D when Chang'an (ancient name of Xi'an) was the capital of the empire. In the Muslim street of Xi'an, stands the mosque with the oldest inscribed stele recording the arrival of first Muslims to China and we have chosen this mosque as a prototype of vernacular architecture. The sub-methods included observation, intensive interviews, participant observation and frequent personal communications. In order to place the field-acquired information in context, we consulted the archival data extensively regarding the history of Muslim minority and their architectural patterns in China. As, the facts observed in the field stand as disjointed realities if not contextualized properly, it has been made sure to record them with proper historical antecedence. Personal communications instead of formal interviews with the attendants of mosques and older people of community proved to be particularly productive in gathering the experiential and oral historical narratives. The historical data about the construction and factional affiliations of the mosques has been obtained through several conversation sessions with the ahongs of the mosques.

## 3. Authority Differentials, Intra-group Dissonance and Mosques

Islam in China is not monolithic quite like any religious tradition in any part of the world and thus responses of Chinese Muslims towards the host Chinese majority too vary depending upon the personal propensities, circumstantial requisites and inevitable diversity of human nature. Hui have a long history of existence in Chinese lands and since their localization in Chinese society during Ming, they have been struggling keeping equilibrium between two powerful stimulating constituents of their dual identity i.e. Islam and Chinese culture. The vigorous dynamism of keeping pace with authentic form of Islamic practices and simultaneously dealing with the socio-cultural challenges of the Chinese society has always been at work in the history of Hui. So, they have been working on a continuum between *Huihua* (Islamization) and *Hua-hua* (sinicization) if described in the terms coined by an eminent Chinese Muslim scholar *Fu Tong-xien* in the beginning of twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>In contemporary times, these trends manifest themselves in more categorical form as after Deng's reforms; China has become an actively engaging country with the outer world quite contrary to her xenophobic social history during the last few centuries. This openness and freedom has granted Hui new opportunities of venturing into the Muslim world and seeking the ideals of authenticity and legitimacy in the religious observances from the Muslim world. But it must be noted that flow of ideas from the outer Muslim world to the Chinese Muslim community is not a modern phenomenon at all rather it has recurrently happened in the history and the newness only lies in the fact that the recent currents are more convenient and frequent aided by globalized intercommunication and Chinese open foreign trade policies with the Gulf countries.

<sup>12</sup>Chang Chung-Fu, "Diversity in Islamic Sectarian Antagonism: Revival of Modern Reformism and Its Rival Long Ahongin Linxia," in *Everyday Life of Islam: Focus on Islam Long Ahong in China Conference*, vol. 7 (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University, 2012), 3

Chinese Muslims, like many other Muslim minorities, since their inception in China had been looking forward to the sacred places of Islam i.e. Makkah and in turn Arabia as the source of religious authority and authenticity. This connection was interrupted partially because of Ming's policy of isolating Muslims from their spiritual homelands and integrating them but still the pilgrimage was a tool of interconnection between Chinese Muslims and their places of reverence. It was the harsh consequence of Rebellions during Qing that Hui were cut-off from their spiritual home and Islam in China began to develop in purely Chinese social context. The atmosphere of oppression and ethnic distinction made Hui stick to the inherited religious practices more enthusiastically and they tended to safeguard these observances more cautiously considering them the hallmark of their Muslim identity. In the beginning of twentieth century, the Hui community of Xi'an was mainly mosque-centered with a relatively independent hierarchy of each mosque, exclusively following the *Hanafi* school of thought with no factional divisions at all. In the twentieth century with the establishment of New China, there was rehabilitation of relationships between Hui and the outer Muslim world and this is where the story of *Jiaopai*<sup>13</sup> began among the Hui community of Xi'an. During the periods of isolation and seclusion, Hui had developed many ways to cope with the challenges of the changing social contexts while not compromising the basic Islamic principles but definitely making room for some adaptations peculiar to the Muslim community of China. These adaptations and adjustments were sometimes not aligned with the Islamic observances prevalent in the outer Muslim world this is why when the pilgrims or the Hui students travelled to the majority Muslim countries in twentieth century; they found that some Islamic practices in China were different from the rest of the Muslim world. This made them feel deprived and lost in the broader context of Muslim Ummah and they passionately aimed to reunite the lost Hui community of China with larger Muslim community. They took up the task of reforming and purifying Islam from the reminiscence of assimilation into non-Muslim Chinese society. This pattern of thought was a direct influence of Pan-Islamic and Reform movements at peak in the Muslim world in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries inspired by the teachings of Mohammad Ben Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792) and Hassan al Banna's (1906-1949) *Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*.

With the introduction of these new trends of reform from the Muslim world, the call of purifying Islam and returning to scriptures echoed among Hui community of Xi'an. What is the standard of authenticity and legitimacy in the religious practices? This became the prime grounds of plurality of Xi'an Hui and laid the foundations of multiple factional identities within the community<sup>14</sup>. Today, this conflict is quite evident and reflects itself clearly in the mosque architecture, religious education and rituals of different factions of Hui. The Reforming factions are against the practices that crept into Islam practiced by Hui as a result of assimilation into the Chinese society. They take the version of Islam practiced in the Arab world as a standard model and try to imitate its patterns. Thus within the Xi'an Hui community, one can discriminate between those who are enthusiastically longing for approximation to the practices of Islam in the outer Muslim Arab world and those who take the

<sup>13</sup>Jiaopai is the Chinese Muslim term for different factions and sectarian divisions within the Muslim community.

<sup>14</sup>Michael Dillon, *China's Muslim Hui community: Migration, Settlement and Sects* (Psychology Press: 1999), 117. Membership of an Islamic order is not just a question of religious belief but an expression of individual and family identity, ["Chinese-Islamic Connections: China's Internal/external Muslim Relations." In *Conference Paper Forms of Exchange: China and the Muslim World* (Berkeley: University of California, 2013), 17], for details of these factions, their clashes and emergence in Xian please see [Li Jianbiao, "Changes in Islam's Status in Modern Shaanxi Province," In *Muslims and a harmonious Society: Selected Papers from a Three-Conference Series on Muslim Minorities in Northwest China. Gansu Province, 2008, Shaanxi Province, 2009, Xinjiang Autonomous Region* (The Religion and Security Research Project, Center on Faith & International Affairs, Institute for Global Engagement, 2009,) 87-88.]

traditional inherited practices of Muslims in China as legitimate and authentic.<sup>15</sup> The latter are known as *Gedimu* or *Lao Jiao* (old sect) who proclaim that unique Chinese Muslim practices bespeak of long historical journey of Muslims in Chinese lands and serve as a connection between them and their foreign Muslim ancestry and thus providing them an alternative source of authenticity and legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand the former Reform movement known as *Yihewani* (followers of Muslim Brotherhood or *Ikhwan*) in Xi'an raised the slogan of *Zunjiang gaisu* which means "venerate the scriptures, reform the customs."<sup>17</sup> The founder of this movement was Ma Wanfu commonly known as Haji Guoyuan, who belonged to Hezhou and stayed in Arabia from 1888-1892<sup>18</sup> and was influenced by *Wahhabi* movement. He came to Shaanxi when he was driven out by Sufi *menhuan* (Mystical order) of Gansu whom he opposed but his refuge in Shaanxi could not produce enough following as *Gedimu* hold was quite strong in the Hui community over there. He called for adopting Arabic and Persian as medium of religious instruction and abandoning Chinese for the purpose.<sup>19</sup> It is believed that the first influential advocate of *Yihewani* teachings in Xi'an was Imam Liu Yuzhen (1861-1943).<sup>20</sup> Upon the introduction of reformed teachings and criticizing the *Gedimu* practices, accusing them with imitation of Buddhists and Taoists, there occurred a serious conflict in Xi'an known as 'The chaos within Islam' and it ended up with deporting Imam Liu and his colleague Imam *Xiao Dazhen* from Xi'an. This faction could make roots in Xi'an Hui community only in twentieth century and now enjoys recognition amongst them being the second largest Hui faction in Xi'an. They name themselves *ping jing li jiao* (depending on the Qur'an to establish religion) or more commonly *Sunnaiti*.<sup>21</sup> Their population grew and they gained strength with the arrival of Hui migrants from Henan, after Sino-Japanese war, who followed *Yihewani* teachings. Another faction calling for reform emerged in 1940's in Xi'an when Ma Debao and Ma Yuqing from Gansu visited the area. They are known as *Santai* (literally means three times) locally as they raise their hand thrice during prayer unlike the common *Hanafi* practice of raising them once. They name themselves *Saleyf* (followers of tradition) influenced by the *Salafiyah* movement in Gulf countries. They are more conservative and strict in their practices than *Yihewani* and known as *guoji* (extremists) by other two factions. Both these new *jiaopai* oppose *Gedimu* in the practices of celebrating the day of Holy Prophet P.B.U.H, erection of burning incense in front of the graves, rites of paying *fidya* (compensation) for dead, wearing white mourning garbs etc. Another important religious reform

<sup>15</sup>"Many currents within Chinese Islam are of uniquely Chinese origin and some Hui attribute greater authenticity to them than recent religious innovations from the Arabian Peninsula." [Alexander Blair Stewart *Ways to be Hui: an Ethno-historic Account of Contentious Identity Construction among the Hui Islamic Minority Nationality of China* San Diego: University of California, 2009), 4.] James Frankel, Gladney and Dillon all of them took this new tide of reform as a classifying agent among the Hui community of China at large.

<sup>16</sup>Being the direct descendants of Muslim who came to China in the golden age of Islam guarantees the *Gedimu* with a unique sense of authenticity that their religious practices are transferred from the companions of the Holy Prophet (*SAW*) directly.

<sup>17</sup>Jianbiao, "Changes in Islam's Status in Modern Shaanxi Province," 87.

<sup>18</sup>Jonathan Lipman, "Familiar Strangers: a Muslim History in China," (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1997), 206.

<sup>19</sup>Its founder reportedly remained ignorant in Chinese language and refused to read and write in Chinese.

<sup>20</sup>He belonged to a village in Northern suburbs of Xi'an and enjoyed a good reputation among local Hui as his family has been serving as *Imams* since five generations. [Jianbiao, "Changes in Islam's Status in Modern Shaanxi Province," 87].

<sup>21</sup>It can be understood as a modification of the word *ahlus-sunnah*, a denomination of *Sunni* Islam found in sub-continent as well. The difference between them and *Santai* is that the former follow *Hanafi* Islam and only call for the purification from *Sinicization* whereas the latter are more radical and scriptural and do not follow *Hanafi* school of thought.

introduced by Ma is not to take wages for Qur'ānic recitation as done by *Gedimu* usually. The new practice is *nian le bu chi, chi le bunian* (if you read do not eat and if you eat do not read).<sup>22</sup> Residents of Xi'an date the arrival of Ma's reform to Xi'an to 1920's. Some said that one of Ma Wanfu's friends introduced the *Yihewani* movement there and some others relate it to the return of some hajji from the pilgrimage.<sup>23</sup> The Western Mosque and *Dapiyuan* mosque are their first centers in the *Huiminjie* (Muslim Street) Xi'an.

These new factions like other Muslim non-Arab societies who received the calls of Islamic reform accompanied by Arab nationalism equated the pure and authentic Islam with Arabization and unconsciously took Arab dress, architecture and pronunciation of Qur'an as standards and symbols of Pure Islam. The affection with Arab patterns and symbols grew and penetrated extensively in some cases and demonstrated itself in a grotesque way sometimes. On 8<sup>th</sup> October 2013, during a visit to *Huiminjie*, I saw a Hui shop decorated with Saudi flag and flaglets on the National Day of Peoples Republic of China. This phenomenon demonstrates that even secular or profane Arab symbols became the objects of Hui association and affiliation so what to say of the religious architecture. Moreover they claim to return to purified Islam under the influence of *Wahhabi* movement and accuse *Gedimu* for polluting Islamic teachings with Chinese customs and impurities. But one must not forget that through all these adaptations and acculturative tendencies, *Gedimu* kept Islamic faith alive in many tyrannical and oppressive reigns from Qing to the Great Leap Forward till today. Precisely the traditional Chinese Muslims have been working in a linear and dialectic way to make Islam intelligible to the Chinese mind and society whereas the new movements are working in the opposite direction to fit Chinese Islam back in the context of broader Muslim Ummah. So this pull and tension between the factions of Chinese Islam is a comprehensive narration of the dilemma of the different loci of Hui identity and their acculturative preferences.

Mosques, being the nuclei of Muslim communities can serve as the focal locales to investigate the behavior patterns of their associated Muslim populace. Mosques within a modern Muslim society serve as identity classifiers<sup>24</sup> as well and this trend is equally emphatically extant in Hui community of Xi'an. This identity is constituted of many factors including the response of its adherents to the outer Chinese world broadly and precisely that is what we are concerned with. Apart from the spiritual and intellectual activities conducted in the premises the very architecture of a Chinese mosque speaks for the intentions, tendencies and orientations of its builders and associates.

#### 4. Mosque Architecture amid Huihua (Islamization) and Huahua (Sinicization)

The discernible association between the mosque architecture and the propensities of its associates has been noticed by Maris Gillette, an American anthropologist who studied Xi'an Hui in 1990's, as well. She observed, "How a mosque looked, conveyed public messages about residents' beliefs, practices and allegiances; their status as authentic Muslims; and their degree of modernization."<sup>25</sup> Jackie Armijo, who conducted an ethnographic research upon the Kunming Hui

<sup>22</sup>It nullifies the concept of taking wages or having meal when Ahong and Manla go to recite Qur'ān at someone's place on a family occasion.

<sup>23</sup>Maris Boyd Gillette, *Between Mecca and Beijing: Modernization and Consumption among Urban Chinese Muslims* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 78.

<sup>24</sup>This is so because each mosque enjoys a factional identity and is attended by the adherents of that particular faction. And if one wants to know about the sectarian trends of somebody, one can do that conveniently by knowing the mosque he attends.

<sup>25</sup>Maris, *Between Mecca and Beijing: Modernization and Consumption among Urban Chinese Muslims*, 93.



community, also reflected the same kind of observation.<sup>26</sup> Berlie as well marked this trend extant among the Hui communities she studied.<sup>27</sup>

Traditionally, mosques in China are constructed with the architectural characteristics quite similar to a Buddhist temple and it is only their symmetrical direction or the prayer hall's structure along with the *Sini*<sup>28</sup> calligraphy which declares them to be an Islamic prayer edifice. This style of architecture is known as *chuantong jianzhu* (traditional architecture) among Hui. Since it is the architecture employed to construct temples, Han identify it as *simiao jianzhu* (temple architecture).<sup>29</sup> This resemblance with the temples makes the new factions render *Gedimu* mosques as the 'non-authentic' ones. In the traditional architecture, the Chinese legendary animals like phoenix and dragon are carved on the roof of the mosque which is a violation of Qur'ānic prohibition of making images in the praying premises. The Reform factions claim that such a resemblance of Muslim Mosques with Buddhist temples is a blasphemy and cast doubts on the legitimacy of Islamic practices conducted within.

#### 4.1. Traditional Chinese Mosque architecture *Chuan Tong Jianzhu*

Traditional Chinese architecture follows some basic principles which grant it a peculiar uniformity and coherence that strikingly appeal to the foreign observers. Their uniqueness lies in their bilateral symmetrical construction and their small heights. They are a whole complex of small interconnected units with succession of courtyards built on a narrow longitudinal North-South axis leading to the focal building located on the end of the axial line in South. And this focal building discloses the purpose of the edifice. *Siheyuan* (four-sided compound enclosures)<sup>30</sup> are the most obvious characteristic of Chinese buildings. *Fengshui* (geomancy) is another very significant principle underlying the building of structures. *Fengshui*<sup>31</sup> includes the regulation of directions of building, the flow of nature inside it and the mutual proportion of screen wall and gate as well. Chinese buildings possess asymmetrical gardens to include the element of nature and create an effect of proximity to nature amongst the dwellers. The gates are physiological as well as psychological structures which if erected facing the screen wall, serve to keep the *kuai* (bad spirits) away. The pagodas are the only heightened structures in Chinese architecture which betray an imported influence of Indian Stupa thanks to inception of Buddhism. The usage of timber instead of stone or brick as the basic structural material is a common feature of buildings since ancient times in China. Timber belongs to the trees which are alive and thus their presence around adds a sense of vivacity in the

<sup>26</sup>Jackie Armijo, "Muslim Education in China: Chinese Madrasas and Linkages to Islamic Schools Abroad," in *The Madrasa in Asia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 180.

<sup>27</sup>Jean Berlie, *Islam in China: Hui and Uyghurs between modernization and Sinicization* (White Lotus Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>28</sup>*Sini* is the script of writing Qur'ānic Arabic innovated by Chinese Muslim calligraphers. Almost all the mosques of Imperial China are decorated with *Sini* calligraphy. This form has evident influences from Chinese calligraphy, using a horsehair brush instead of the standard reed pen. A famous modern calligrapher in this tradition is Hajji Noor Deen Mi Guangjiang.

<sup>29</sup>Chinese have a whole developed hierarchy of rank in the construction of houses, palaces and temples and color, number, the roof structure, animals made on the roof etc. all play a significant role in determining the status and rank of the building. [Edward Williams, "Confucianism and the New China," *Harvard Theological Review* 9, no. 3 (1916): 276.

<sup>30</sup>Since Han times (206 BCE–CE 220), Chinese writers had promulgated the idea of a four-sided world, with the south the focus and with temporal and symbolic associations for each side. [Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, "China's Earliest Mosques," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 3 (2008): 332.

<sup>31</sup>Feng means wind and shui is water. Fengshui combines the trinity of the Heaven, the Earth and humans, and seeks harmony between selected site, orienting, natural doctrine and human fate.



dwelling ambiance whereas bricks and stones are lifeless so they have been used in construction of tombs and mausoleums. The roofs with eaves turned upside are another symbolic representation of growth and life imparting a sense of verve and dynamism. The structure of the roof<sup>32</sup> and animals<sup>33</sup> carved upon it indeed speak for the status and rank of the building and its dwellers. Muslims adapted these architectural features to build mosques by adding few essential structural features.

In CCP histories of religious architecture, the architecture of the mosques built during Ming and Qing dynasties are classified as “National Minority type.”<sup>34</sup> Such architecture integrates the requirements of Islamic religious practices with traditional Chinese architectural planning, construction and formal details. In Islamic religious architecture, although form is significant yet not essential rather “its relevance is a supportive one, supplementing and enhancing its function. In terms of value and substance the form always comes second to function and its wide scope.”<sup>35</sup> Islamic faith necessitates the essential principal of functionality in the architectural plane and provides the broad spectrum opportunity to its adherents to modify the form of the mosque edifices as required by the “climate, geography, traditions, economy and building technology of the places where they were constructed.”<sup>36</sup> And this flexibility and vitality of Islamic aesthetics produced a variety of Islamic architectural enterprise all over the world unified by the universal functional features of Muslim worshipping place and a community center. “Islamic architecture thus promotes unity in diversity, that is, the unity of message and purpose, and the diversity of styles, methods and solutions. Certainly, this makes Islamic architecture relevant and dynamic as well as consistent and adaptable.”<sup>37</sup>

This is the rationale that when the mosques during the integrative period of Ming were constructed in China, the Muslims readily adopted the Chinese building structure in order not to look alien. *Fengshui* of Chinese mindset demanded a bilaterally symmetrical building plan along the narrow longitudinal axis on North-South horizontal plane but the Muslims had to face *Ka'aba* in the West during prayer so plane was shifted to the East West directions. Prayer hall was constructed at the axial point of successive *Siheyuan*, following Chinese architectural pattern and its interior was furnished with purely Islamic and Qur'anic inscriptions though the tools employed for embellishment were evolved in a syncretic Islamic Chinese context. In Chinese architecture of mosques, the dome and minarets, which are assumed to be the characteristic features of mosques, do not exist. The minaret is said to be replaced by a pagoda shaped pavilion.

To a casual observer, it may seem that in the vein of integration and localization, Chinese Muslims abandoned many of the essential features of mosques. So it is better to have a brief overview of the history of construction of mosques<sup>38</sup> in Islamic world and see the evolution of the

<sup>32</sup>The eaves of the roofs are usually categorized into three types i.e. straight inclined for commoners, multi-inclined for the elite class and sweeping for the imperial and religious architecture. Duagong (brackets to support the roof) is a feature reserved strictly for the imperial buildings and only shared by the large religious edifices.

<sup>33</sup>The number of animals on the roof determines the status and function of a building. The maximum number is displayed on the roof of the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City Beijing where nine beasts along with the immortal guardian and dragon are carved.

<sup>34</sup>They divide the Chinese mosque architecture into four types including Central Asian type, transitional type, national minority type and Xinjiang regional type.

<sup>35</sup>Spahic Omer, “Towards Understanding Islamic Architecture.” *Islamic Studies* 47, no. 4 (2008): 483–510.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 494.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 489.

<sup>38</sup>See, for instance, Keppel Archibald Cameron Creswell, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* (Librairie du Liban, 1968), 3-4; Nasser Rabbat, “What is Islamic Architecture Anyway?.” *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (2012): 1.

characteristics through time which now became the categorical part of mosques worldwide. Five architectural features are usually associated with the mosque edifice i.e. the *Qibla* wall, *mehrab* (niche) *minbar* (pulpit), dome and minarets. There are some other features as well shared by most of the mosques like the courtyard (*sahn*) in front of the prayer hall and the places for ablution along with arched corridors. Out of all these, only one, the *qibla*, the wall oriented in the direction of the *Ka'ba* in Makkah, is necessary and this feature was found in the mosque of the Prophet (*SAW*) built in Medina. The rest of the structures including minaret and domes evolved later whereas the *minbar* was there in the mosque of The Holy Prophet (*SAW*) which he used for religious exhortations. All these additional structures such as dome and minarets are neither essential for an authentic mosque nor do they have any absolute ontological meaning. They evolved and got inculcated in the mosque architecture by the believers under the exigencies of time and space thus their relativity imparts the mosque builders with freedom to accommodate or abandon them as per the requirements of their society. They can be freely revised, improved or adjusted and the practice of Chinese mosque construction is a precedent for this phenomenon.

There are some features in the mosques which are common to both Chinese and Islamic civilizations like the decoration of walls and pillars with beautiful inscriptions and the presence of educational centers adjacent to the mosques. "In a Chinese setting it is common to find lecture halls for resident affiliates and sometimes for visitors. Historically, Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian religious institutions have included schools on their grounds."<sup>39</sup> Similar is the case of mosques, they always have a place for the learners of Holy Qur'an and the big mosques have developed educational facilities for advanced Islamic learning. Calligraphy is an art highly esteemed in both Chinese and Islamic civilizations. In Islamic art, it gets paramount importance as Islamic religious edifices are adorned with Arabic calligraphy. "Calligraphy is believed to be the visual embodiments of the sacred word... The origins of Islamic calligraphy are traced all the way back to God, who is believed to have written the celestial archetype of the Qur'an."<sup>40</sup> In China, the Muslims adorned their mosques with *Sini* script in which Chinese calligraphic tools were used to write the Arabic verses and words. These are the general features of Chinese mosques which make them syncretic structures comprising of the Chinese architectural structure and performing the function of a Muslim worshipping place.

We have chosen two mosques each representing one of the factions of Xi'an Hui i.e. The Hua Jue Xiang Mosque for Gedimu and The Jian Guo Xiang Mosque for the *Sunnaiti* possessing Chinese and Middle-Eastern architectural characteristics respectively.

#### 4.2. Hua juexiang Mosque Xi'an

Hua juexiang mosque in Xi'an is considered by many of the anthropologists and historians of China as the best preserved edifice to serve as an example of Chinese mosque architecture. Its present building began in 1392 and it was refurbished and restored multiple times under the imperial patronage. In 1956, after the establishment of Peoples Republic of China, this mosque was registered at the provincial level before all other mosques of Xi'an and then it was registered as a national-level key protected cultural relic in 1988 after promulgation of Deng Xiaoping's reform policies. During the Cultural Revolutions, it was considerably damaged by Red Guards. Then it was repaired on a large scale by the Xi'an city government in 1984.<sup>41</sup> This mosque is under the state monitoring and Ahongs are appointed in collaboration with the Religious Affairs Bureau and Chinese Islamic Association.

<sup>39</sup>Nancy, "China's Earliest Mosques," 332.

<sup>40</sup>Abdelkebir Khatibi, and Mohammed Sijelmassi, *The Splendours of Islamic Calligraphy* (London: Thames & Hudson: 1995), 28.

<sup>41</sup>Personal interview with the caretaker of the mosque on February 28<sup>th</sup> 2014

The mosque occupies a narrow lot about 48 meters by 248 meters, and the boundary walls enclose a total area of 12,000 square meters with its single axis aligned from east to west, facing Makkah, lined with courtyards and pavilions. The symmetry thus resembles a Buddhist or Confucian temple constructed during Ming dynasty with the disparity of Western orientation of its axis. There are symmetrical gardens in the *Siheyuan*, a characteristic of Chinese buildings usually not found in traditional mosque architecture. Since the mosque was built under the imperial patronage, it bears the eminent characteristics of Chinese architecture associated with palaces or temples of very high profile. Its extra-ordinary long symmetry with five successive courtyards and its hexagonal pavilions, the adornment of its roofs with imperial brackets remind one of many extremely venerated Chinese edifices like Confucian Temple in Qufu<sup>42</sup> and the Hall of Virtuous Tranquility at the Temple to the Northern Peak.<sup>43</sup> This is the excellent and rare combination and adaptation of a mosque building with the key-features of Chinese imperial architecture that makes the mosque unique and attractive for a tourist as well as a student of integrative Chinese Muslim architecture.

The first courtyard of the mosque is comprised of two boundary walls, two side gates, a central *pailou* (ceremonial wooden gate-way) and a five-bay gate. On the northern side stands the lecture hall. Its roof is wide with the eaves raised from the front side and the roof ridges are carved with dragon sculptures and floral motifs like a Buddhist temple. But the mosque reflects Islamic shades when the gate-ways are seen to be adorned with Arabic calligraphy (Qur'anic verses and sayings of the Prophet P.B.U.H) instead of dragon sculptures.

In the second courtyard, there is a stone *pailou* made mimicking the wooden structure. It also contains two stele pavilions one of them holding a record of repair in 1606 A.D and the other one recording a repair in 1772 A.D. The stone *pailou* leads immediately to the third courtyard called *Qing Xiu Dian*, or "Place of Meditation" where the most conspicuous structure is an octagonal pagoda known as *Sheng xinlou* (tower of visiting/examining heart). For some, it depicted the Chinese form of the minaret. This three storied tower is brick made and is almost ten meters high, each story has an attic and wooden balcony with brackets and dragon carvings on the eaves. Chrysanthemums, lotus flowers and peonies<sup>44</sup> are frequently used to adorn the ceiling of tower and wooden partitions of the rooms. The fourth courtyard can be entered through three gate ways and was built during Qing and is said to resemble the phoenix in its structure. The gate ways leading to the fifth and last courtyard are called Cloud Gateways and there on the western axial edge stands the main worshipping place which properly is a *masjid* in the sense where the praying activity takes place actually. So, the mosque structure, like other distinctive Chinese edifices, stands with its focal building at the end of its structure unlike the non-Chinese mosques where the whole building structure is sacralized and used for functional purposes of prayer.

A dragon symbol is carved at the entrance steps opposite the prayer hall symbolizing the integration of Islamic and Chinese architectural aesthetics. The prayer hall is what startles an observer for the first time as it lacks any statues or alters which one may be anticipating while wandering through the temple like pavilions and *pailou* of the building. The ceiling of the huge prayer hall covering an area of 1270 square meters is fully covered with the divine names written in patterns of flowers. The most spectacular thing in the prayer hall is the calligraphy on huge wooden boards on its two side walls and a front wall. The whole thirty parts of Holy Qur'an are engraved in Arabic with its translation in Chinese language with ten parts on each wall. The *mehrab* or niche on *Qibla* wall is in a separate enclave to whom the prayer hall leads, it is almost two meters high and is adorned with

<sup>42</sup>Name of a City in China

<sup>43</sup>This was the temple where the emperor or his surrogate performed imperial rites. Nancy, "China's Earliest Mosques," 347.

<sup>44</sup>All these flowers are of symbolic importance in the local Chinese tradition particularly Lotus carries a special status in both Chinese philosophy and Buddhism.

several layers of Arabic inscription in *Sini* script. Among the four layers of Arabesque around the arch of niche, one is embedded in a pool of lotuses symbolizing the merging of Chinese and Islamic cultures. Behind the prayer hall there are two small constructed hills which may be accessed by two circular moon gates on either side of the wall and are used for the ceremonial viewing of the new moon which determine the beginning of new lunar month for Muslims.

The *Ahong* (Imām) and other people of *Gedimu* faction who attend this mosque perceive it to be a symbol of their identity as Chinese Muslims. While talking to me, they shared the feeling that this mosque is a connecting link between them and their past and a reminder to the new generations that Islam is and has been the religion of their ancestors living in China since many centuries. They also viewed that the imperial architecture of the mosque proves that Islam has been a religion of peace and harmony and except the bloody turmoil in late Qing; it has been in good terms with the empire. The Ming-Qing renovations and refurbishing of the mosque, convey the message that Muslims have been a peaceful minority, loyal to the Chinese state and devout to their religion simultaneously. The *Ahong* of the mosque also insisted that replacing this traditional architecture with the modern one means eradicating the roots of Hui from Chinese soil and obliterating the inevitable connections of the Hui with their past and its achievements which flourished in peculiar Chinese context. Responding to the issue of the ‘authenticity’ of new architectural patterns and other associated sinicized practices, the old members of the *Gedimu* community stated that they are the descendents of the companions of the Holy Prophet (*SAW*) and their ancestors strictly safeguarded the teachings of the Prophet (*SAW*) till today so their practices are more authentic than what the Reform sects practice. They were also of the view that the students who study overseas in Muslim countries, though they acquire a good amount of Islamic knowledge but they are not well versed in local Hui customs and practices so they may commit errors in dealing with the issues of Hui community so an *Ahong* should be locally trained and well aware of local Hui tradition.

#### 4.3. Jian Guo Xiang Mosque

This is a relatively new mosque, built in 1950 for the first time with a simple structure and its extant edifice was built and renovated in 2003. This mosque belongs to the Reform faction known as *Yihewani* locally but the *Ahong* states that the adherents of this mosque are *Ahlussunnah* (people of tradition of the Prophet (*SAW*)). the mosque manifests a purely Middle Eastern architecture. It is a two storey building with main prayer hall located upstairs but the downstairs hall too serves as prayer hall when the upper storey gets filled. On the major Muslim festivals like Eid prayers, there are huge gatherings and people pray in the courtyard too. A magnificent green dome above the entry gate and minarets on the roof of the prayer hall identify the purpose of edifice immediately from outside. On the way to the mosque entrance, there is a wall magazine on right side wall with its title written in both Arabic and Chinese. This magazine contains the contents of Chinese Muslim culture. The main gate leads immediately to a courtyard surrounded by the buildings on two sides and confronted by boundary wall. The whole building is painted in white with no extra decorations or embellishments applied. No traces of Chinese architecture are seen at all and one recognizes that mosque belongs to a Chinese Muslim community after encountering the Hui faces only. The prayer time clock demonstrates the times of five collective prayers with the names of prayers written in both Arabic and Chinese. There is a female mosque attached to this mosque where women pray independently although the *Zhuma* (Friday) sermon of *Ahong* can be heard clearly in the female prayer hall through the speakers. There are female *ahongs* in the mosque who lead the prayers but unlike male *Ahong*, they only recite the intention loudly to start the prayer and then ending *salam* of the prayer; rest is recited in the heart independently. They also teach Holy Qur’ān to the women in the teaching hall upstairs the prayer hall. Currently there are twenty students which male and female *Ahong*<sup>45</sup> both

<sup>45</sup>Personal talk to Ma Rui, female Ahong at Jian Guo Xiang Nu si

mentioned as “*ajuz*” which means old in Arabic. Every time, I went to the female mosque, found no youngster praying there except the *Ahongs* who are pretty young girls.

The mosque was built by local Hui themselves and has no state interference. When I asked *Ahong* about whether the mosque is registered with Chinese government and the administrative committee has coordination with official organizations, his response was an emphatic negation. His point was that the state authorities are *Kafir* (non-believer) so they must not get involved in the sacred enterprise of mosque related activities.<sup>46</sup> The *Ahong* and his disciples excitedly told me that their mosque is constructed according to pure Islamic rules and resemble the standard mosques in Arabia and other Muslim countries.

### 5. Architecture and Integration: A Conclusive Discussion

The minorities tend to relate themselves to their ancestors and the symbols associated with them through various connections in the past for the sake of preserving their unique identity and preventing assimilation and annihilation of their unique self-amongst the majority civilization. This axiom is very much true in the case of Hui people of Xi'an; they have preserved their unique religious features and observances constituting their peculiar identity from Tang to today despite undergoing through many persecutions and pressures under various rules and reigns. They have inherited some very significant cenotaphs and connecting links from their past that not only help them keep their past alive through commemoration rather make them realize that how their roots are entrenched in Chinese soil since a long period of time. These cenotaphs could be both psychological in the form of memories and folk tales and embodied in the form of tombs of the Hui ancestors and mosques. The integrative architecture of the mosques built in *chuantong jianzhu* symbolizes that Hui managed to exist successfully balancing and harmonizing between their dual identities. They believe that Islamic architecture is a broad term and it does not call for imitation of any particular pattern.<sup>47</sup> Since “architecture enables us to place ourselves in the continuum of culture,”<sup>48</sup> this integrative architecture helps Hui to place themselves at the continuum between China and Islam. This makes them an heir and resident of Chinese lands as authentic as any Han could be because it affirms their long historical presence and contribution to the cultural heritage of Chinese civilization. On the other hand, the existence of a mosque as a center of their community categorizes their neighborhood to be an essentially Islamic one unique from surrounding Han and akin to their Muslim brothers in Ummah out there. The adherents of Traditional mosques today emphasize Hui heritage and preservation of long history of Islam in China.<sup>49</sup> And the traditional mosque architecture carries the meaning of ‘authenticity’ for them as it has been the way of their ancestors.

For the people who are influenced by the Arab world and the modern reform movements the traditional mosque architecture is a reminiscent of Han sway which Muslims had to adopt when they were under the integrative pressures in imperial China. Now they are free and allowed to practice their religion so they should get rid of these structures which are *laobanfa* (outdated).<sup>50</sup> For them, traditional mosques transmit no sense of continuity with a memorable past rather embody architectural language unauthentic in Islam, mimicking the Han temples and monasteries of Buddhism. They believe that sinicization and integration had corrupted the true spirit of Islam so one should purify the religious edifices from the stains of Han veneer. They opine that form and function

<sup>46</sup>An informal talk with Ahong of Jian Guo Xiang Mosque on March 28, 2014.

<sup>47</sup>Spahic, “Towards Understanding Islamic Architecture,” 501

<sup>48</sup>Juhani Pallasmaa, “An Architecture of the Seven Senses,” *Architecture And Urbanism-Tokyo* (1994): 27-38, [https://marywoodthesisresearch.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/an-architecture-of-the-seven-senses\\_pallasmaa.pdf](https://marywoodthesisresearch.files.wordpress.com/2014/03/an-architecture-of-the-seven-senses_pallasmaa.pdf)

<sup>49</sup>Personal interviews with Hui at Xi'an Great Mosque

<sup>50</sup>For Reformers, these structures are no more required so they use this term for traditional mosque architecture.

of the architecture are correlated and should not be divorced from each other. . Since Hui beliefs are different from Han beliefs and customs their worshipping places should depict this distinction. So, if the mosque is to be constructed it should look like any other mosque in the Islamic world. This disparity of opinion became evident when the mosques were reconstructed after the Cultural Revolution was over. In 1990's, ten mosques were restored in the Muslim Quarter out of which six were traditional, two Arabian and two syncretic.<sup>51</sup>

In the recent years, the trend has changed considerably; almost all the new mosques constructed throughout China<sup>52</sup> including Xi'an are modeled on Arab patterns with no complex architecture and exhaustive ornamentation. The calligraphic script is no more *Sini* and the mosques bear all the characteristic features generally associated to the mosque architecture i.e. domes, minarets and courtyard etc. It can be called 'neopseudo- Middle Eastern'<sup>53</sup> mosque architecture. It is getting popular on two notes; first one is that the Chinese students and scholars returning from the Arab world assume their architecture to be more authentic and close to true spirit of Islam and the second one is the increasing economic support and investment of Arab countries in the construction of mosques and religious educational centers in China. But this trend inevitably is causing harm to the cultural heritage of Hui. Berlie, too disapproved the new architecture in these terms saying, "This rather neutral style, trying without success to be universal, eradicates history. In adopting this new "look," the young generation forgets the past... These ancient places of worship go far back into the history of Chinese Islam, which is thus forever effaced."<sup>54</sup> Jackie Armijo witnessed tearing down of a traditional mosque in Kunming in order to be replaced with the new architectural pattern. Communicating to the people over there he regretted the loss of traditional history of Muslims in China through the destruction of such mosques but the locals were of the view that new mosque is "more authentic and less Chinese."<sup>55</sup> The same opinion was held by the Hui of Xi'an who advocated the replacement of the traditional mosques with new ones. They want to approximate the Arab architecture and style in their mosques in every way possible as the Islam practiced in the Middle East is an ideal parameter for them to gauge their religiosity and its legitimacy. On the other hand the Chinese cultural symbols and icons epitomize the paradigm opposite to the truly Islamic one and any semblance with Han customs and ways in the sphere of religion is totally redundant particularly when Hui have rights to religious liberty under CCP. So, any kind of proximity or resemblance to the non-Islamic architecture is not acceptable whereas the traditional mosques are evidently temple like structures and thus there is no room for them in 'pure' Islam. What adds to the aversion of this traditional mosque architecture by the Reform Hui is the carving of figurative images on the crests of the roofs which is essentially un-Islamic and not permissible at all according to them.

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Author(s) declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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<sup>51</sup>Maris, *Between Mecca and Beijing: Modernization and Consumption among Urban Chinese Muslims*, 96.

<sup>52</sup>Dru C. Gladney, "Sino-Middle Eastern Perspectives and Relations since the Gulf War: Views from Below," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 4 (1994): 677-691.

<sup>53</sup>Jackie, "Muslim Education in China: Chinese Madrasas and Linkages to Islamic Schools Abroad," 180.

<sup>54</sup>Berlie, "Islam in China: Hui and Uyghurs between Modernization and Sinicization," 15.

<sup>55</sup>Armijo, "Muslim Education in China: Chinese Madrasas and Linkages to Islamic Schools Abroad," 180.

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