

Original Research Article

# Finding the Architectural Pattern of Chinese Mosques

## (Case Study: The Great Mosque of Xian)

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**Abstract** | The land of China has always been one of the main civilizations of the East. This country has never been part of the Muslim realm or even had a government with the Islamic religion. However, from the beginning of the formation of Islamic civilization until today, Chinese Muslims have had a special place, such as mosque. Architecture is one of the most prominent relics of human civilization, and in this regard, valuable works have been created in Chinese Muslim civilization. There is a question here that where has the architectural model of Chinese mosques come from, considering the civilization that Muslims have created through economic or cultural relations leading to the transmission of Islam and the formation of Chinese mosques; To answer this question, one of the perfect examples of Chinese Mosques called the Great Mosque of Xian has been reviewed. In the present study, to discover the architectural pattern of this mosque, the characteristics of the early Islamic mosques and the pre-Islamic architecture of China have been compared. The present article is based on the premise that the architectural model of Chinese Mosques has been derived from its ancient temples. The adopted research method is a case study analysis, and interpretations are based on the features of the selected sample of 'Medina Mosque', from the early Islamic mosques, and the 'Confucius Nanjing Temple' from the native architecture of China in pre-Islamic times. The comparative study of the Great Mosque of Xian with early Chinese mosques and temples shows that the architectural pattern of this mosque is derived from the traditional Chinese temples and its influence from Islamic mosques is limited to the building direction the presence of Mihrab, changing the function of traditional architectural spaces and using Islamic architectural scripts in traditional decorations of the target building.

**Keywords** | *Architectural Pattern, Chinese Architecture, Great Mosque of Xian, Confucius Nanjing Temple.*

**Introduction** | China has long been one of the farthest lands where Islam found its way to and many Chinese became Muslims there. Hence, some of the mosques were built in China, are still standing. Among these mosques, there is the Great Mosque of Xian, located in the Muslim region of Xian city. The old construction,

dimension, grandeur, decoration, and architectural integrity of this mosque indicate the existence of a developed model of mosque architecture in China. In the present study, finding the architectural pattern of this mosque has been discussed. This article seeks to extract the architectural features of the Great Mosque of Xian to compare it with the original Islamic

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mosques and other local buildings in China looking for its primary architectural patterns.

### Research background

Hagras points out in his studies that Chinese mosques are recognized as a different form of mosques in the Islamic world, not only in Xian but throughout China (Hagras, 2017, 97). He has studied the design of China's mosques and believes its pattern must be derived from the Chinese designs, including multilayered structures and wooden ceilings (Hagras, 2017, 102). He also points that Muslim leaders started to build mosques during the Ming dynasty in connection with the construction of Chinese mosques, referring to the tablets. In fact, they have been kind of the patrons of Islamic art and architecture in China (Hagras, 2019b, 150).

Another similar study points out that these mosques have been influenced by Chinese culture in a way that they have become a place with Chinese architectural features, without diminishing the values of Islamic law (Andrianawati, 2019, 1). About the confrontation of Islam with the existing religions in China, studies have been conducted using the Islamic concept of "Din Al-Fitrah" (or man's innate desire to worship God), along with the desire to interact positively with the Neo-Confucianism thought that uniquely point to the formation of a multicultural Islamic form, the Hān Kitāb (Wain, 2016).

Kadoi (2018) in a book (consists of 11 chapters) deals with the convergence of the environmental requirements of the Muslim community and the traditional Chinese architectural system; He also points that how foreign religions were allowed to build their own religious buildings in a non-monotheistic land. In this condition, some styles have been formed, that the "Hui" style can be pointed here. Del Medico and Qurrat ul Ain in their studies have mentioned that this style, despite being developed in Han society, is not a simple imitation of its architecture but rather is a combination of Islamic and Chinese tradition (Del Medico, 2017, 2; Qurrat ul Ain, 2015, 209). Regarding the influence of the environment on Islamic architecture, Hoteit believes that the integration of a mosque with its local environment is an obligation. In other words, the architecture of the mosque is required to be inspired or imitated by the architecture of its surroundings or the land where it has been built, and at the same time be in accordance with the essence of Islamic art and culture (Hoteit, 2015, 13547).

Gao points the issue from an urban perspective and believes that the Chinese Mosques are not only influenced by China's local architecture but also can

influence the organization of the surrounding urban spaces; it can divide the living space of Muslim immigrants into points (mosques), lines (streets or traffic lanes) and plates (residential spaces) which by them a pattern of the spatial distribution of the residential circle (mosque + community) is formed and so the surrounding urban environment inevitably will be affected by them (Gao, Ma, Wang, Huang, Mi & Liu, 2019, 133).

Generally, the literature review in this study showed that most research on Chinese Mosques has been more focused on their influence by Chinese traditions, the formation of a combination of Islamic and Chinese art styles, the necessity to integrate mosque architecture with their environment and common aspects of Islamic concepts with the tendency of Chinese religious; however, the physical root cause of Chinese mosque architecture has not been discussed extensively.

In this article, by adopting the case study of the Great Mosque of Xian, the architectural features of the mosque have been first determined by using the descriptive-analytical method, then, a comparison of its features with the mosques of early Islam and Chinese temples has been done. Finally, the root cause of the architectural pattern of the mosque has been gathered by analyzing the differences and similarities of the architectural features.

### Hypothesis

The present article is based on the premise that the architectural model of Chinese Mosques has been derived from its ancient temples.

### Research method

This article seeks to extract the architectural features of the Great Mosque of Xian to compare it with the original Islamic mosques and other local buildings in China looking for its primary architectural patterns.

### Theoretical foundations

#### • Great Mosque of Xian

Xian city is the ancient capital of China and the Great Mosque of Xian is one of the most famous Islamic mosques in this land. Xian, or Huajuexiang Mosque is one of the biggest and well-preserved early mosques in China (Huajuexiang Mosque, n.d.).

This huge and historic area is located in a residential and Muslim region of the city. According to the historical records, the stone tablets engraved in this mosque date back to the Tang Dynasty in 742 AD. The rulers of the Tang Dynasty used to decorate their empire with magnificent wooden buildings. All of these buildings have been totally destroyed (Gardner, 1995, 74). This

historic mosque was developed and renovated during the dynasties of Song, Uan, Ming, and Qing. The Great Mosque covers a total area of 13,000 square meters, of which more than 6,000 square meters are covered by buildings. The building is separated into four yards in a rectangular shape from east to west (the *Guidebook of Great Mosque of Xian*, 2010); (Fig. 1).

In the first courtyard, as shown in Fig. 2, there is an old wooden pathway, which is decorated with a carved brick-mud wall on both sides. This passage with a rooftop of a curved ledge towards the top looks very magnificent with layers of fortes and glazed tiles. The construction of the passage is supposed to be initiated in the 17th century, about 360 years ago. There are several rooms available on both sides of the passage, showing some old furniture, built during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Between the five large halls in the middle part of the second courtyard, three connected buildings are preserved by four columns. In the middle

part of the third courtyard, there is an “introverted tower” in the form of a minaret, which is taller than all other parts of the mosque.

The minaret has three floors, with triple layers of roof eaves and an octagonal covering, equipped with a built-in place for calling to prayer (Adhan), which has a very attractive and motivating appearance (Fig. 3). To the east of the building, there is an ablution (Wudu) space for Muslims to perform ablutions before prayers. The ‘Empire Hall’, located in the third courtyard is one of the oldest parts of the building. In this area, there is a cut of stone called “Moon Tablet” (Yuè Bei) which is written in Arabic. This manuscript has been written by a famous past leader; it is about the calculation of the Muslim calendar (lunar/ Hijri calendar). Today, this stone tablet has been registered as a valuable historical work (Fig. 4).

The walls which are in the space between three halls, connected to the last courtyard of the mosque,

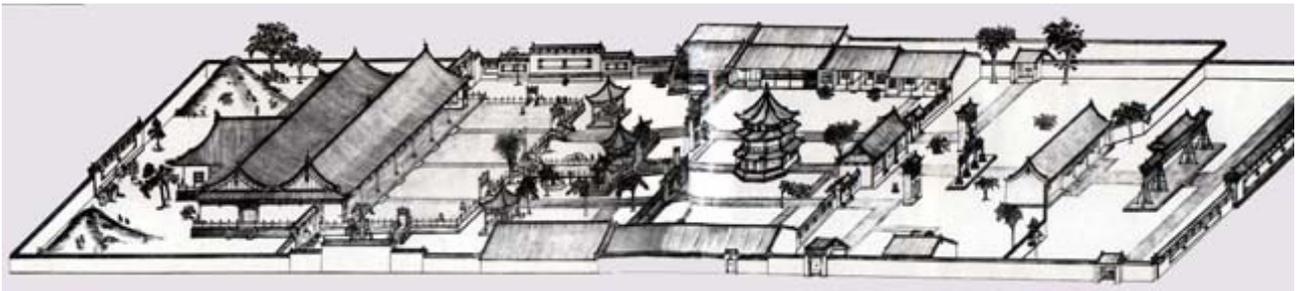


Fig. 1. The Great Mosque of Xian along the East-West direction. Source: www.archnet.org.



Fig. 2. The wooden passage located in the middle of the first courtyard of the Great Mosque of Xian. Source: www.archnet.org.

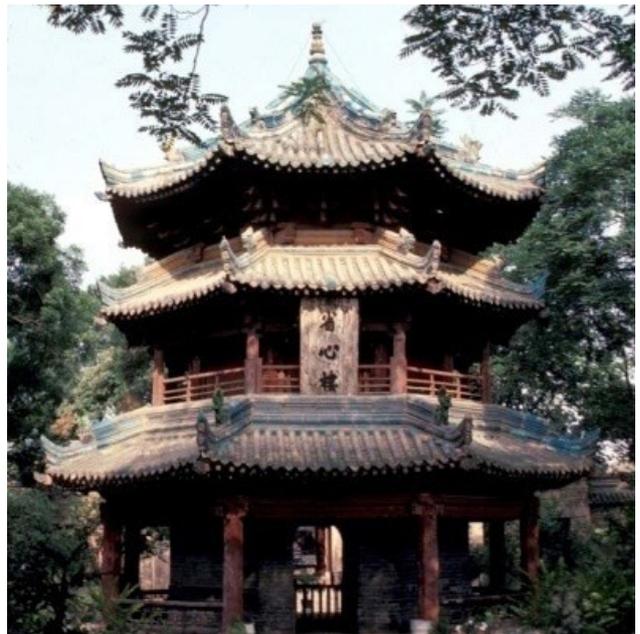


Fig. 3. The Minaret of the Great Mosque of Xian. Source: www.archnet.org.

is gorgeously engraved with fine and small bricks. Around the interior space of the hall (Mosque nave, Shabestan), the whole pages of the Holy Quran have been engraved on 600 pieces of large wooden boards, which among them, 30 boards are written in Chinese and the rest are in Arabic. This large hall can provide amenities for one thousand Muslims to perform their religious duties at one time (The Guidebook of Xian Great Mosque, 2010).

**Discussion**

**• A Comparative Study between the Early Islamic Mosques and the Great Mosque of Xian**

After the Quba Mosque (Fig. 5), the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina (Al-Masjid an-Nabawi) is the first built space as a mosque in the history of Islam. (Pirnia, 2010). The area is facing Mecca and presents

a hypostyle hall (Shabestan) with courtyard, rooms (Hojreh) for living, and Soffeh (Dizani, 2017); (Fig. 6). However, it has been developed and undergone many changes over time. The Great Mosque of Xian (Fig. 7), similar to the Prophet Mosque, has been developed in different times. The most significant architectural feature in this building is the east-west orientation that has been taken from the Prophet’s Mosque, that is because Muslims pray towards the Kaaba and the main direction of their mosques must be towards Mecca. The existence of a covered space at the end of the Great Mosque is considered as the main space allocated for holding congregational prayers, which its architectural pattern is quite similar to the Prophet’s Mosque. The lateral spaces that have been gradually added to the early Islamic mosques are present in the Great Mosque of Xian, which includes Mihrab,



Fig. 4. The Historical stone tablet of the Grand Mosque in Arabic. Source: www.archnet.org.

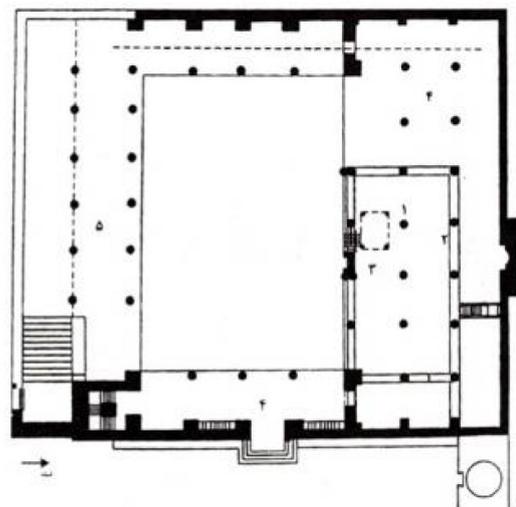


Fig. 5. Quba Mosque, the first Islamic mosque. Source: Pirnia, 2010.

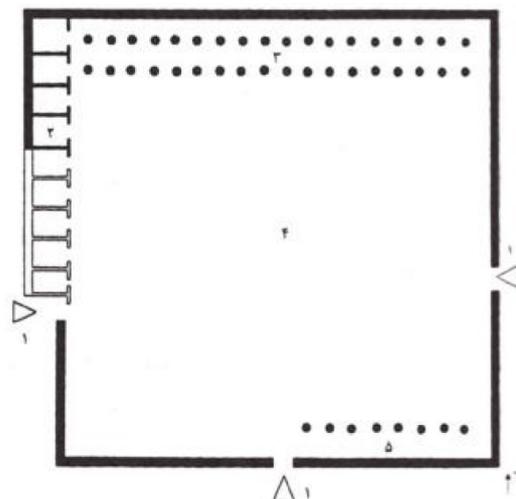


Fig. 6. Prophet’s Mosque (PBUH): The initial construction by the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Source: Pirnia, 2010.

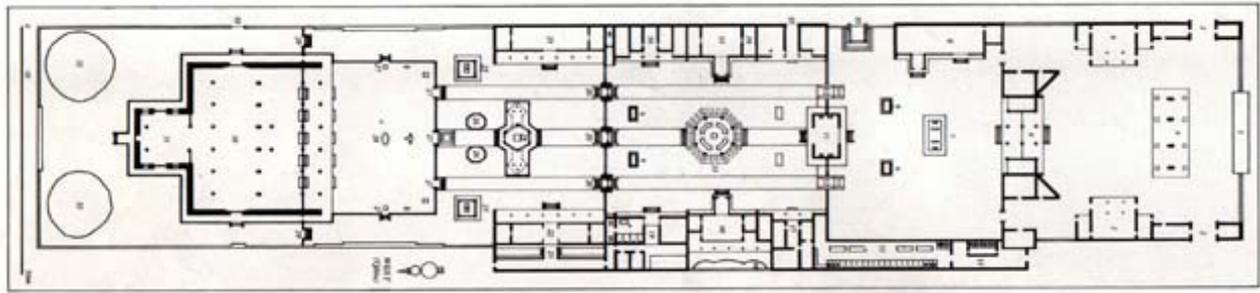


Fig. 7. The Plan of Great Mosque of Xian. Source: [www.archnet.org](http://www.archnet.org).

Minaret, the Wooden passage, the Drum Tower, the Bell Tower, and the Halls.

Although they are not similar to the Arab-Islamic mosques from the architectural point of view, the decorations here are a combination of traditional Chinese ones and the common decorations of Islamic mosques. The importance of the Qur'an's language in Arabic as the miracle (Mu'jiza) of the Prophet of Islam, caused the Arabic scripts to be used as decorations in Islamic buildings. Similarly, there are valuable architectural decorations built in stone, brick, and wood in the Great Mosque of Xian. Generally, the functional pattern of the key spaces in the Great Mosque of Xian is based on the architecture of Islamic mosques. However, the architectural pattern taken from the early Islamic mosques is limited to their orientation towards the qibla and applying the architectural decorations, especially the use of geometry and Arabic scripts.

#### • A comparative study between the Pattern of the Great Mosque of Xian with the traditional Chinese buildings

To compare the pattern of the Great Mosque of Xian with those traditional Chinese buildings, the architectural characteristics of China's traditional

temple, called the 'Confucius Temple' in Nanjing, have been studied (Fig. 8).

In this part, the target temple adopted and its architectural characteristics were introduced in comparison with the Great Mosque of Xian. The Temple of Confucius was first built in 1034 AD in the Song Dynasty. The architectural style of the temple and the surrounding buildings is greatly based on the construction done in 1869, before the invasion of Nanjing by the Japanese and burning the temple. The current building was renovated as far as possible in 1986 based on the original stone works. The temple consists of three connected courtyards, two of which are large and separated by another small one. The "Great Holy" hall overlooks the first courtyard and is the largest building in the area with a double-arched roof. At the back of the "Great Holy" hall, there is a small yard that is surrounded by a gateway (Fig. 9).

Behind the north-facing gate, there is another courtyard, that its main building is known as the "Bright Virtue" hall, which is the second-largest building in the complex with a single roof. This hall is used to play Confucian classical music (Fig. 10). This courtyard consists of 'Drum Tower' on the west side and a 'Bell Tower' on the east side. There are



Fig. 8. The courtyard of the first Confucius Temple in Nanjing. Source: Authors's archive.



Fig. 9. The third courtyard of the Confucius Temple in Nanjing. Source: Authors archive.



Fig. 10. The second courtyard of the Confucius Temple in Nanjing and the "Bright Virtue" hall. Source: Authors archive.

exhibition halls around the courtyard for representing the Confucian school in ceremonies and rituals (Fig. 11). While in most religions, the structure of ritual buildings is the symbol of that religion, and this imposed structure has been frequently repeated in other geographies or regions, however, the structural form in mosque architecture is highly influenced by local and geographical factors, as it turns to a symbol of that specific region over time. The Confucius Temple complex and the Great Mosque of Xian are both placed in a regular quadrate structure in the historical context, but the mosque has an east-west expansion, faces the qibla. The temple and the mosque architectural spaces are located linearly on an axis, as

it has an axial symmetry from the entrance gate to the endpoint of the space. The first passage of the mosque is located in the first courtyard, while the first passage of the temple is located in the pre-function space of the entrance space. The composition of the architectural spaces both in the temple and the mosque are formed one after the other. The main halls of both buildings overlook the courtyard. The lateral spaces of the Great Mosque of Xian have a functional change compared to the Confucius Temple, including the 'Bell Tower' and 'Drum Tower', which have turned into a 'Minaret' or a memorial building; furthermore, the exhibition spaces around the courtyards in the temple is allocated to the teachings of Confucius, while the counterpart spaces in the mosque mostly belong to donations and inscriptions (Dizani, 2014); (Figs. 12 & 13).

The architectural structure of buildings and their belongings such as gardening, memorial passages, entrances, and other related spaces are similar, as generally, the structures and materials used in them are similar too. The decorations, which are the main features of Chinese architecture, are present in both buildings. The main difference in the architectural decorations of these two buildings is the presence of human statues and sculptures in the Temple of Confucius, which are absent in the mosque spaces. The main characteristic of the Great Mosque of Xian is the wide use of Islamic scripts in brick, stone, and wood as decoration.



Fig. 11. The third courtyard of the Confucius Temple in Nanjing- The 'Bell Tower' on the right and the 'Drum Tower' on the left. Source: Authors archive.

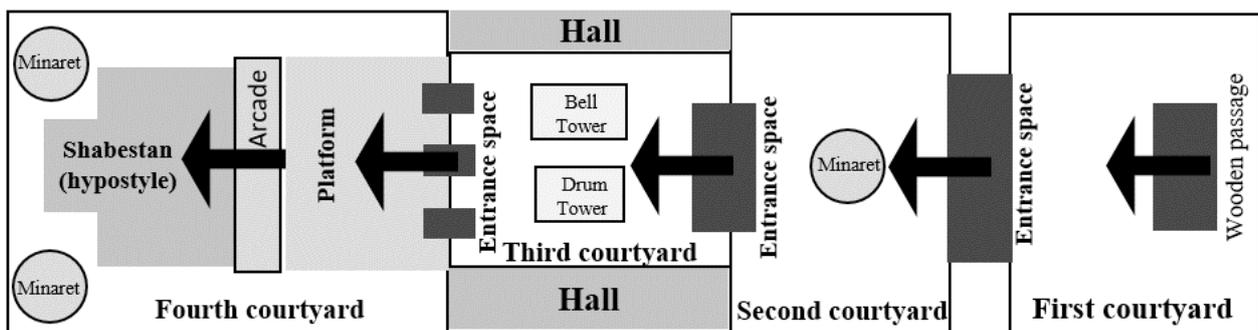


Fig. 12. Diagram of axial placement and type of access in the mosque. Source: Authors.

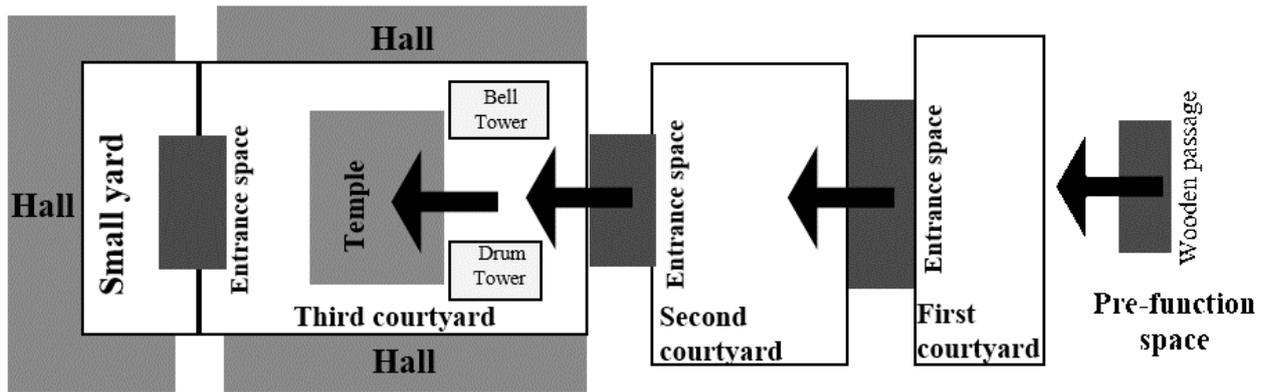


Fig. 13. Diagram of axial placement and type of access in the Temple. Source: Authors.

## Conclusion

Using the architectural pattern of the Great Mosque of Xian in comparison to the early Islamic mosques is highly in its function. The east-west direction of this building is in relation to the local geography facing the qibla. The use of Islamic geometry and scripts in decorations of Great Mosque of Xian is an example of using the patterns applied in Islamic mosques. Comparing the architectural pattern of the great mosques with those of temples is more related to the similarity of the plan's composition, the placement of the spaces in a certain direction, the common order of entering the spaces, and the existence of similar material and structures. The Great Mosque has natural

and artificial elements and shares some similarities in terms of decorations with traditional Chinese architecture; its significant difference with the Chinese temples is the removal of human statues and sculptures. By comparing the Great Mosque of Xian with the original Chinese mosques and temples, it appears that the mosque's architectural model is almost taken from the traditional Chinese temples. However, some functional changes in spaces and the geometric and Islamic scripts, which are related to the direction of the qibla, in decorations have been influenced by Islamic architecture. Therefore, it seems that the architectural pattern of the Great Mosque of Xian has greatly been derived from the ancient Chinese temples.

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