
Xingyu Jiao¹,a, Xin Geng²,b, Xin Ke³,c, Xinze Li⁴,d and Minglu Yu⁵,e

¹, ², ³, ⁴, ⁵ Southwest Minzu University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

¹1342895004@qq.com, bkeenti on@163.com, csixteengogo@icloud.com
d619912743@qq.com, e1148068029@qq.com

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Abstract: As a minority of China, the Hui people believe in Islam rooted in the Middle East, contributing to the distinct architectural styles and structures of the Hui Nationality. The mosques in China strictly follow the basic principles of and inherit certain characteristics of Muslim architectures. Similarly, the decorative designs may reference the painting principles and techniques of Islam. To better study the religious buildings and traditional patterns of the Hui Nationality, it is essential, without doubt, to discuss the traditional Islamic arts of architecture and pattern and compare the arts of both Hui Nationality at home and the Islam abroad.

Introduction

In spite of the distinct national and local features, we can easily see the China-Arab characteristics in the architectural crafts and arts of the Hui Nationality. Based on the case study of the Hui mosques, the construction specifications, structures, patterns and decorative styles of Islam are integrated with the traditional construction and decoration techniques of China, embodying the unique aesthetics and artistic pursuits of the Hui people from the inside out.

Hui’s Arts of Religious Buildings

In the Tang Dynasty, the Arabian Mohammedans travelled along the Silk Road to visit China for doing business. The ones dwelling in Ningxia for a long time turned into the Hui ancestors at the very beginning.

Thanks to the policy of conciliation implemented by the Hui Nationality in the early Ming Dynasty, it was exposed to the stable development and the great increase in population. The mosques then sprung up has stood for the prosperity of the Hui Nationality.

While keeping the faith in Islam, the Hui people built their mosques (e.g. Najiahu Mosque) by referencing the styles of Chinese Buddhist temples, with the original features reserved, including the prayer hall, bathrooms, teaching rooms, imams’ rooms, minarets and other temple structures. The Chinese Buddhist temples generally face south. However, the mosques have their prayer halls faced east. A prayer hall calls for a large area on account of its function, for which purpose, two or three Chinese-style roofs are usually connected in parallel.

The Islamic decorations were admitted into inland China from the west featuring the abundant gypsum materials. This is the reason why the gypsum has become a popular decoration element for the vaults, wall finishes, plinths and other structures of most Muslim architectures. The wall paintings, ceilings or edges of interior temple walls were frequently fitted with some pre-processed plaster sculptures as the art materials. Besides, the inner architectural spaces were also decorated with such materials carrying the sayings of the Koran and the Islamic sages for the decorative purposes.

Another decorative element of the Muslim architectures lies in the relievos illustrating the remarkable features of such structures, which have been applied to the wall paintings for graphic creation and brought about the 3D effect. They are found on the exterior wall finishes of mosques.
and qubbahes, etc. The plaster relieves constitute the time-honored part of the Muslim architectures and were the Islamic pioneers to spread to northwest China. Such process was invented as early as in the Northern Song or Earlier Song Dynasty and well developed in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The long-run development has built the plaster relieves of Muslim architectures into an artwork in line with the aesthetics of Muslim and other nationalities, particularly the Han Nationality.

Most Islamic architectures voice the Muslims’ enthusiasm in knowledge and faith. In the early years, the top of date palm is the high point inviting the Muslim brothers to pray. Nowadays, there have been the telecom towers of the same shape.

As an absolutely significant form of Islamic arts, the Hui people prefer the wooden structure and timber frame based building system characterized by the bearing structures totally or primarily made of wood. Where, the beam columns, other than the walls, are the load-carrying members, resulting in the flexible layout of doors and windows. Thus, we are lucky to enjoy the etherealize and sublime building outlines. There is no doubt that such craftsmanship inspires the glorious structures of the Hui Nationality.

Compared with the classical European architectures and the Gothic architectures, the Islamic ones are unique, solemn, diversified, magnificent and elegant in consideration of the varying regions, ages and styles. What’s more, their domes have been famed the world over, which totally go against those in Europe. With the considerable material costs saved, the circular arches and domes increase the span of raw materials, which answers for the mechanics principles.

For the purpose of better chanting, the special dome structures may gather and amplify the voice, with the mysterious, peaceful and solemn religiousness echoed. On the side, such structures are good for the open, bright and tall inner space.

The pointed arches, mosque arches, multi-foil arches, semi-circular arches, scheme arches are popular with the openings in doors and windows, with the last two mainly for the secondary parts. There are the animal patterns, geometrical patterns and character patterns on the buildings, as detailed below.

**Hui’s Islamic Patterns**

The patterns are the most widely used for the Islamic decorations. People highly praise the plaster relieves for the exquisite sculpting skills. After being extruded, printed, carved and otherwise treated, the patterns appear on the raw materials (i.e. gypsum) and then finalized by kilning. They have been an integral part of the Muslim architectures in China.

Because of the same materials, the architectures have contributed to the success of many sculptures, including the decorative bands and relieves on walls or columns. Let alone the superiorities in vividness, reproducibility and presentation, it is not news that the huge and tall statues may play a role as the columns. Both inside and outside of most Muslim architectures are decorated with gypsum, contributing to the distinct plaster sculptures, which are mainly the relieves for the buildings of Islamic style.

The Islamic architectures have their facades decorated by referencing the Arabian architectural ornaments to a certain extent, which bring about the exotic charm. We can read the religions idea of Islam (i.e. the Heaven and the Earth in one) from the ever-changing arrays and gorgeous decorative patterns, such as the geometrical ornaments and symbols arising from the regular combination, conversion and circulation of the basic geometrical shapes (e.g. star, triangle, square, rhombus, cross and fylfot), longitude lines, latitude lines, diagonal lines, midpoints and center circles.

The Muslims are the first in the world to integrate the geometrical ornaments with their religious art. As the dominant decoration skill and the embodiment of high aesthetic quality, it has demonstrated not only the advanced mathematical knowledge but also the big picture based architectonics of the Muslims. The specific images of God are absent for the patterns because the Islamism accepts neither any specific image of God nor the heathenism. However, the Xinjiang fellows are skilled in designing the building decorations based on the flowers and plants, including the rose, apple, grape, bouquet and cirrus, which avoids the tedious production. No column of a fixed style will appear in the Islamic structures. The chapiters and plinths are generally surrounded
by the sophisticate combination of the patterns of flowers and plants. Thanks to the infinitely variable works, it can be asserted that there will be the endless decorative patterns.

In addition, the Islamic buildings are renowned for the rich interior decorations, including the marble veneering, glazed brick mosaics and plaster molding. Nearly every mosque has a Mihrab indicating the worship direction, which is a key decoration of temple. The Muslims always prefer the unparalleled magnificent temple centers.

The elements of traditional Chinese patterns have appeared in Hui’s decorative patterns after being introduced to China. We need to know that, however, Hui’s decorative patterns shall be the ones with the cultural identification of Islam other than the ones created by “Islam”. Therefore, the rules and drawing/using principles of such Islamic patterns with Hui’s characteristics are retained to the maximum extent.

Another religious art element of the Hui Nationality lies in the worship object, which is extremely different from other religions with the concrete “Gods” and “Objects”. That is, the Hui people and their Islam worship “Allah” – a God without any specific image. In consequence, the nonobjective patterns (e.g. plants, geometric figures and Arabian writings) have been developed. The plants based patterns mainly focus on the shapes of flowers, grass and leaves, which are exaggerated and transformed to create a unique style, with the roots winded layer upon layer. The whole pattern is regularly repetitive and symmetrical.

The geometric figures include circle, polygon, arch and multi-arc, which may be used alone and together with others. The Arabian writings are well arranged to maintain the rhythmic beauty of characters, which is the best presentation of the cultural identity of the Hui Nationality. It is common to see both Chinese and western elements in one pattern. Moreover, the bright colors and high contrast lead to the liquid but impressive visual effect. The traditional patterns of the Hui Nationality are also suitable for the modern interior designs, including the patterned carpets/furniture and mosaic tile walls or floors.

The repetitive and regular patterns highlight the well-managed and tidy living space. The bright and contrasting colors take away the monotony and bring about the dramatic tone. The visitors are lost in the shocking, luxurious, bold and pure sense of beauty by mixing the national features and the modern trends.

There are three Islamic patterns of the Hui Nationality on the whole, which are respectively: 1. Arabic Calligraphy. The Arabian writing is themed and de-structured according to the diversified Arabic calligraphies, with the characters converted into the beautiful patterns in response to the exposed surface by virtue of size contrast, spatial contrast and density adjustment. 2. Arabesque. Such Arabic art of patterns highlights the plant elements and prefers the rotating and mirroring techniques, with the plant images extracted to illustrate the cycle and rhythm. The elements in the shape of leaf, flower or the like jointly build the vine patterns (nonrepresentational vol-grass pattern). 3. Repeated geometric patterns.

The geometry, graphic pattern and symmetry play the significant roles in Hui’s Islamic arts. Therefore, the auxiliary lines used to be made available for certain basic figures, while drawing the patterns of geometric models, so as to better carry out the subsequent processes. Such figures are the most popular with Hui’s Islamic patterns, which are named “Khatam -Suleiman”, i.e. the seal of Suleiman. With an eight pointed star based figure taken for example, a circle is folded for 4 times at a central angle of 45 degrees. Afterwards, four points of 90 degrees apart are connected respectively to build two overlapped squares. The “Khatam -Suleiman” is finally done by removing the circles and the overlapped lines in both squares.

The panels of difference shapes constitute the major part of the mosaic technique for Hui’s Islamic patterns. Such panels feature the bright colors. The mosaic patterns are drawn on paper according to the experience based evolution process. For instance, an eight pointed star pattern has its center at the intersection of perpendicular and horizontal tangent lines. In addition, the circle happens to be a corner of a 12*12 sub-square, which spans 6 grid segments. Such shape is generated by drawing the lines to the grid either along a parallel segment or at 45 degrees with a segment.
A graphic pattern may have its different parts selected, by just repeatedly reproducing the target part, to build a complete pattern. The symmetrical pattern models include a special rhombus with an angle of 60 degrees. Where, such parallelogram may be deemed as a unit of the pattern model or a repetitive unit.

In terms of Hui’s Islamic decorative patterns, it is popular that the considerable geometric schemes appear on many items in other shapes, including: tile, brick wall, wood, brass, paper, gypsum and glass. We can see the same on the carpets, manuscripts and wooden carvings, particularly the doors, screens and preach platforms. Of course, it is the most common on the building surfaces.

The Hui people almost have their religious architectures totally covered by the various patterns which incessantly guide the believers with respect to their behaviors and living styles. In addition to the sense of geometrical aesthetics, the development and inheritance of patterns have contributed to the integration of science and Hui’s Islam. There will be definitely an impressive page for the Islamic architectures of Hui Nationality in the architectural history.

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