

Convergence through Courtyards: Spatial Identity and Meanings in Xi'an's Great Mosque

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Abstract:

As one of the earliest mosques in China, the Great Mosque of Xi'an (also known as the Huajuexiang Mosque) was built in 742 AD and has undergone multiple reconstructions. It is an active place of worship for local Muslims while serving as a popular tourist site for non-Muslim visitors. Unlike mosques in other countries, this mosque has maintained strong Chinese architecture traditions such as timber frame structures, curved roofs and wooden ornaments. The building layout, derived from courtyard-style residential architecture, consists of five courtyards along a long east-west axis. The presence of Islamic elements such as the orientation towards Mecca, Arabic calligraphies, and the prayer hall are well incorporated into the whole complex. In short, the Great Mosque of Xi'an is an excellent example of combining traditional Chinese architectural forms with Islamic religious activities.

As a worship place, mosques establish a meaningful relationship between people and a given environment to identify and orient people's faith and beliefs by physical symbols and their meaning of social-cultural behaviors. This paper examines the spatial meanings of courtyards of the Great Mosque of Xi'an by analyzing how the courtyards, a form of traditional residential architecture, was transformed into a meaningful Islamic symbol. Specifically, this paper uses courtyards at the Great Mosque of Xi'an as a case to demonstrate how different cultural meanings were presented and converged together through physical spaces by the spatial articulation of religious activities and the functions.

The findings will bring a better understanding of a unique mosque architecture that is characterized by architectural forms different from the mainstream Islamic world but still performing the same purposes and activities.

Keywords: China mosque, courtyard, spatial identity, Islamic architecture

1. Introduction ¹

Comprehending meanings is a basic instinct of the soul and a primal need of people living in a meaningful world. The range of existing meanings can be found in a man's daily life. Thus, a

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place implies the establishment of a meaningful relationship between a man and a given environment. Schulz (1985) observes that the relationship consisted of an act of identification, that is, a sense of belonging to a certain place. Human beings find themselves when they settle somewhere, and their being-in-the-world is thereby determined. As a result, humans can comprehend meanings through symbols, which give substance to and embody abstract concepts and ideas to turn the unknowable into the knowable, the intangible into the tangible, and the intricate into the simple.

Architecture can be considered a system of symbols. By the availability of certain materials and the constraints and capabilities of certain technologies, human beings can construct a space, which becomes a shelter not only for their physical needs of daily life but also for their intrapsychic peace. Architecture is more than art, because it produces the domains of human society, separating the inner from the outer by creating layers of distances. More importantly, those layers of distances are arranged by a certain order that forms a series of symbols helping users discover their social, economic and political hierarchies and positions in the world. Through representing humans' being-in-the-world, a space becomes a human space, a meaningful place to humans' interpretations and creations. Therefore, only when someone reveals the meaning of a place through symbolic expressions, and makes other people understand it, does the space become meaningful to everyone. Rapoport (1969) argues that building forms, representing the aims and desires of a unified social or cultural group for an ideal environment, reveals the meaning of social-cultural purposes by symbolic expression. Every social-cultural meaning in architecture is expressed by a group of special architectural languages.

Schulz (1985) also poses that the meaning of space has two fundamental aspects — identification and orientation. Through identification, humans achieve an ownership of a place, and thus create and develop their identities that are generally bonded with that place. A group of people's social identity consists of an interiorization of shared understandings on things, which consequently develop shared values and beliefs. In addition, in order to develop an identity, the group of people should expand their identifications of a place and consequently develop an ownership by constantly adjusting their surroundings with agreed symbols and forms. On the other hand, orientation refers to spatial organization, which creates an order of spatial functionality and understanding, leading actions and lives to take place. Symbolism through identifications and orientations was an intrinsic part of traditional approaches in both China and the Middle East, creating the meaningful dialogue between humans and buildings. This dialogue, in turn, instigates the growth of shared understandings and shared values, which lead to further development of the identity.

During the 7th Century to the 15th Century, both China and the Islamic world were experiencing high level of economic and cultural development. With vibrant trading activities between the two major civilizations, ideas, knowledge and ideologies were exchanged along with goods like spices and silk – When the Chinese taught Arab and Persian merchants and traders technological tricks of papermaking and compass, they also learned advanced astronomy, mathematics, and the belief of Islam. There were two main trading routes to China from the Middle East at that time: 1) sea route, sailing through the ancient sea trade route of Persian

(Arabian) Gulf around the Malay peninsula, providing links with cities along the southeast coast of China such as Guangzhou, Quanzhou and Yangzhou; and 2) by land using the northwest area of China of the so called “Silk and Spice Road,” a more conventional land trading route that used to connecting China to Constantinople and on to Rome in earlier centuries (Sun, 2003, p. 118).

Through those two routes, influences of Islamic principles and teachings, including the ideas of mosque architecture, were introduced to residents in different regions with different levels of cultural, social and economic developments. The sea route took shorter travel time but accommodated smaller numbers of travelers and traders while the land route made longer trips but allowed more people and goods to access to the destinations. This formed the two different styles of mosque buildings in China: one is mainly located in southeast China along the coast regions that adopt traditional Chinese planning and architecture; and the other can be found in places along the land route in northwest China that were dominated by imported styles from the Middle East such as Arabic domes and four tall towers.

The distribution patterns of these two types reflect the interplay, negotiation, conflict, exchange, and incorporation between the two main cultural forces between the Arabic-based Islamic and the traditional Chinese ones. The former is more prevalent in major Chinese cities where the traditional Chinese cultural identity is so strong that the imported styles need to be modified to redefine the Islamic characteristics. The latter is located around the edges of the old empire of China where the combats of culture always take place in history. In spite of their differences in forms, all mosques in China are located in the center of Muslim communities and follow the essential norms of mosque architecture: a prayer hall-centered layout with its orientation toward the *qibla*, the direction of Mecca, the bath or cleaning facility, and teaching /learning halls. Steinhardt (2015) examined about one hundred “early mosques” of China before 1900, illustrating regional and stylistic differences within local Chinese Muslim communities. Steinhardt found that all Chinese mosques virtually accommodate all Islamic functions and activities.

This paper examines spatial identity and meaning in early China’s mosques, taking the Great Mosque of Xi’an, one of the oldest mosques in the world, as a case study to demonstrate the convergence and interplay between the traditional Chinese architecture and the Islamic symbolisms through the analysis and interpretations of courtyards. . A case study approach was adopted to provide an in-depth understating and detailed illustration (Alajmi & Al-Haroun, 2022). The primary sources of spatial patterns studied in this paper are the authors’ own observations.

The Islamic representation in a Chinese context is a complicate architectural product. Therefore, this study does not restrict itself to the boundaries of Chinese architectural history or the history of Islamic architecture. This study does not employ a chronological or descriptive study to explain such complicated architectural product as it will only produce too broad understandings and fail to develop meaningful arguments. Rather, this study makes social and synchronic analysis based on the building features of the Great Mosque of Xi’an, particularly its courtyard spaces, and develop critical arguments and theorization. The purpose of this study is not to describe what happened in China’s mosque architecture in the past, but to analyze the

symbolic meanings of its product with social concepts and theories and interpret them to form intelligible understandings.

There are three analysis methods used in this study: 1) systematic review – focusing on the spatial evidence of courtyard, this study systematically and explicitly examine the building forms of the Great Mosque of Xi’an in the contexts of cultural, social, and historical systems; 2) qualitative anatomy analysis – this study dissects the complicate forms of courtyards within the Great Mosque of Xi’an into different spatial elements, each of which is qualitatively analyzed; and 3) comparative evaluation – by comparing the similarities and differences between mosques in China and their counterparts in the Middle East, this study investigates the development of Islamic representations by China forms.

2. Spatial Features of the Great Mosque of Xi’an

Not surprising to find that classical features of Islamic architecture, including domes and arches, are not part of the Chinese tradition of building in wood. The best example of early China’s mosques is its largest mosque, the Great Mosque of Xi’an (Steinhardt N. S., 2015, p. 121). It can be dated back to 742 AD and has been destroyed and rebuilt several times in history and the most recent rebuilt was taken place in 1764 (Zhang, 1981). Surrounded by dense residences of Chinese Muslims, it is located close to the landmark of traditional city center of Xi’an, the Bell Tower. The entire complex occupies an elongated rectangular site of 245m long and 47m wide, inside which a group of halls, gates, pavilions, and structures are organized within five courtyards (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). This mosque complex is considered one of the oldest and largest mosques in China. It serves as a major worship place for over 60,000 Muslims living around and a tourist site today.

Contrast to all other religious temples in China, whose layouts normally adopt the south-north orientation, the Great Mosque of Xi’an is built along its east-west axis with the main entrance at the east end and the Prayer Hall at the west end, reflecting the Islamic principle of *qibia*, the direction of Mecca which is now to the West of China. The whole complex covers an area of 12,000 square meters. The first courtyard is located right behind the main entrance and is featured by a 9 meters tall wooden archway, highlighting the entrance while serving as the first visual focus within the first courtyard. This courtyard contains the “Unmatched Pavilion”, in the center of the northern wall. This pavilion has a hipped roof and central projection and wide raised eaves. It serves as a library today. On both sides lie the two guest rooms.

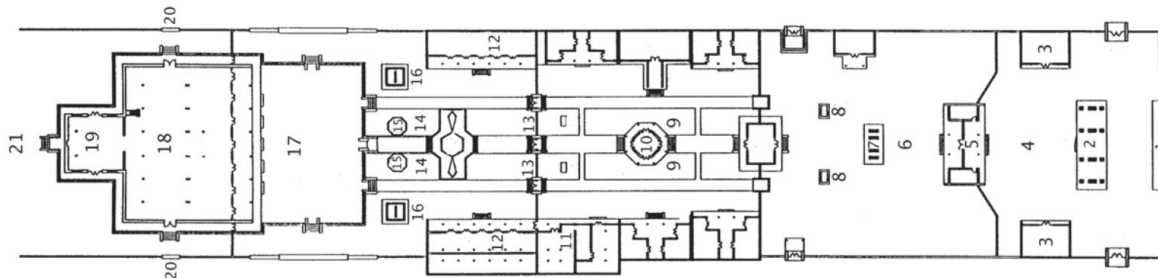


Figure 1 The layout of the Great Mosque of Xi’an. (1) screen wall (2) wooden pailou (3) side gate (4) first courtyard (5) gate (6) second courtyard (7) stone paifang (8) stele pavilion (9) third courtyard (10) Shengxinlou (11) hall for ablutions (12) lecture hall

(13) conjoined stone gates (14) Yiyizhi Pavilion (15) hexagonal pond (16) stele pavilion (17) yuetai (18) prayer hall (19) yaodian (20) screen wall (21) location of screen wall. (Steinhardt N. S., *China's Early Mosques*, 2015)

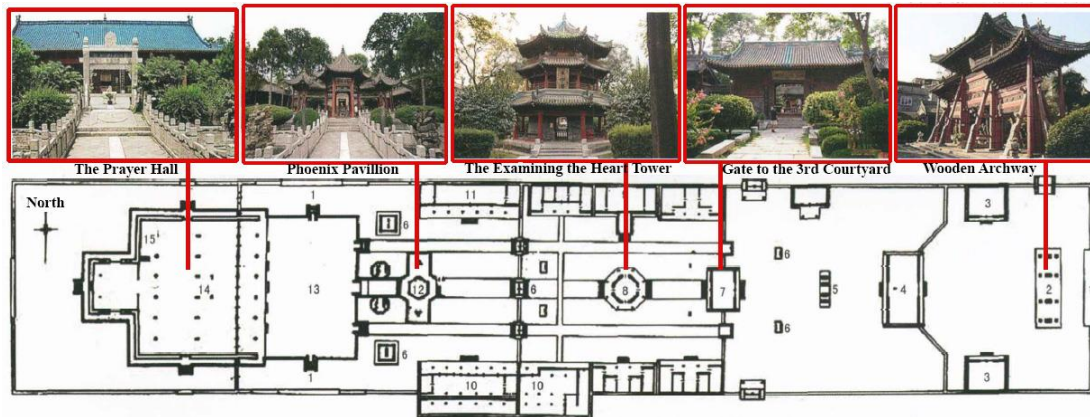


Figure 2 The layout of the Great Mosque of Xi'an and its key buildings/structures. (Fan, 2013)

The second court separates from the first by a shallow roofed pavilion. In the center of this courtyard, a rectilinear stone with three doorways is erected to resemble a wooden structure. The central doorway is higher and wider than the other two flanking ones, reinforcing the east-west axis. The most significant elements in this courtyard and, probably in the mosque, is the two freestanding vertical brick piers, each of which has a carved floral motif topped with eave roof and dougong brackets. The most confronting representation can be found in these monumental piers, the representation of animal figures (Fig.3). Unusual in Islamic architecture but not surprising to find them in Chinese architecture, these monumental have dragon heads crowning their hipped roofs. What is more confronting is that they look predominant and visible. Figurative sculptures and paintings are rare in Islamic architecture, and if found, they are often located in hidden surfaces or in unnoticeable.



Figure 3 Dragonheads crowning the hipped roof



Figure 4 The central gate of the three marble gates that leads to the fourth courtyard from the third one (Photo by the author).

The third courtyard is called “Place of Meditation.” The dominating octagonal structure is known as “Pavilion for Introspection”. It is an octagonal pagoda 10 meters tall with three eaves stories and wooden balconies featured by dragonheads carved into the ridges. A library, imam’s residence, and two halls of ablutions can be found along the north and south sides of the courtyard.

The fourth courtyard is the mosque’s main courtyard which bring people to the prayer hall through the “Phoenix Pavilion” and two halls of ablution that connect to other two halls of ablutions at the third courtyard. This courtyard is separate from the third courtyard by three marble gates with wooden doors (Fig.4). The central gate leads to the “Phoenix Pavilion,” one main pavilion with two smaller ones on both sides. All three pavilions’ rooflines connect the central one, the largest and hexagonal, extending the invisible east-west axis. The apparently Chinese pyramidal roofline of the pavilion conceals a highly carved wooden cupola that crowns the central space. Its main supporting elements are the Islamic squinch vault form which helps bridge the transition from squared corners to the circumferential perimeter of the dome’s base. In this transition, Chinese bracketing system has been subtly ‘Islamicized’ so that three tiers of free-standing squinches gracefully transform the hexagonal space into a hemisphere. In fact, this copula demonstrates the importance some Islamic elements in interior space to attain spiritual identity.

The front entrance of the prayer Hall marks the division between the fourth and the fifth courtyards. As the focus of this ceremonial layout of the Great Mosque of Xian, it is also the climax of a series of spatial sequence of the five courtyards and preceded by a large platform in the fourth courtyard. The prayer hall is comprised of a porch and a great hall with a projecting *qibla* wall and *mihrab* space that always directed towards Mecca. The pray hall covers an open space of 1,270 square meters by a single roof with three distinct hipped roof segments (Fig.5). The hipped roof of the projecting *qibla* area is perpendicular to those of the main hall that run north-south to stress the direction of the worship space.



Figure 3 The prayer hall (photo by the author).

3. Spatial Hierarch through Courtyards

The Islamic doctrines do not directly command the form of sacred spaces where Islamic activities and events take place. As a result, the evolution of mosque architecture has not been driven by religious laws but the needs of the Muslim users. In every Muslim community, a mosque not only is a place of worship but also serves for community gatherings, teachings, cultural practices, and sometimes, markets. The built forms of a mosque reflect various environmental and cultural contexts. However, every single mosque serves as a worship place for all Muslims according to the laws of Islam, which implies that the forms of mosques should indicate the shared values and identities of all Muslims throughout the ages and cross regions (Hillenbrand, 2000).

The first mosque was originated from Prophet Muhammad's Mosque where a large rectangular courtyard was defined by a hypostyle hall, structures, and walls (Fig.6). In this humble place, there was no special architectural style or symbolic form that could be used to deliver the shared values or identities. But the open courtyard allowed Muslims and believers gathered and stood behind the imam to complete their prayers and other religious activities. It was the group activities that facilitated the formation and development of shared values and identities. Hence, the sacred quality of a mosque could be achieved by offering a spatial function through open a courtyard to fulfill prayers' needs.

Mosques are places of encounter, where people exchange ideas, products, and sentiments. Meeting other people and conducting pray implied togetherness, which referred not only to physically stay together, but also to mentally together to shape shared identities. The form of a mosque was the logical consequence of the needs of a Muslim community and served as a symbol to describe and spread the idea of "community."



Figure 4 Drawing of Prophet Muhammad's house (Leacroft & Leacroft, 1976)

Since then, mosques across the world employ open courtyard as a fundamental form that is simple, legible, and easily replicated into different forms. Most mosques in the Middle East adopt the single courtyard pattern where the prayer hall, hypostyle halls and walls enclose an open courtyard in the center with four minarets located at the four corners of the courtyard.

Courtyard layout is a fundamental feature of traditional Chinese buildings. In general, Chinese buildings expand their sizes horizontally and the focus of spatial composition has been placed on courtyards between buildings (Li, 2005). In this composition, a courtyard is a basic spatial module, through the repeated compositions of which a complex is organized. Although the Great Mosque of Xi'an shows a different courtyard pattern – there are five courtyards, one leading to another along the central axis, it attempts to create the sense of community in a different way. In the Middle East, most residents are Muslims. Hence, mosques' forms aim to create an inclusive community that everyone is welcomed to come. Courtyards become the symbol of community inclusiveness that turn mosques in the region a place more than religious worship but also a public space, a market, and a community center. The focus of courtyard in mosques in the Middle East is to define "togetherness." However, this does not apply to the contexts in China where most residents are non-Muslim. As a result, mosques in China cannot become a public place for everyone but only belong to the Islamic groups. Particularly, in a non-Islamic context, it is critical to foster the sense of community among Muslims through a place-making that highlights the differences between Muslims and non-Muslims while promoting the similarity and shared values among Muslims.

Identity is an essential sense of group membership. Some critical factors influence the formation of religious identity, including the sense of affiliation based on the shared religious beliefs and the sense of uniqueness (Parfitt, 1984). China is a totally different context for Muslims who remains a minority of the population. Hence, in order to create and develop a strong identity of Islam, mosques in China should attempt to make spaces that facilitate the formation of shared religious beliefs while clearly marking the differences between Muslims and non-Muslims.

In the Great Mosque of Xi'an, multiple courtyards create multiple gates through which users move between different courtyards. Spatially, those multiple gates and courtyards create more physical layers of distances. The open courtyards are occupied by gardens and vertical structures in the middle, blocking views to see through all courtyards, which also creates more mental layers of distances. Those enlarged physical and mental distances further isolates the interior religious spaces from the outside streets and surrounding communities, defining clear boundaries between the non-Islamic places and the Islamic ones. In addition, the gradually reinforced spatial divisions provide an improved privacy and an enhanced security: non-Muslims are kept outside, and the Muslims are protected inside. This practice has been critical in China's history when the Muslims were always the minority and there are always political or social chaos from time to time.

Along the longitudinal east-west axis, a series of courtyard and building compositions are clustered together in the Xi'an Mosque. Every composition is separated and connected by defined spatial boundaries — courtyards. From the inside out, the prayer hall, the courtyards, the gates, and the main entrance yard formed one sequence of descending order in religious status and spatial positioning: it become more non-Islamic when moving from the prayer hall to the entrance of the mosque. In this dispersion of space from the innermost to the periphery, there is a clear hierarchy in religious terms. On the one hand, the prayer hall is in the inner central

courtyard claimed a higher social and religious status. On the other hand, with the superior scaling of inner space, there is a relative height differential and therefore a relative domination of an inner and more central space over outer and more distant areas (Zhu, 2004).

Courtyards not only encircled the whole complex down to smaller spatial units, but also further dissected, internalized and deepened spaces (Fig. 7). At the spatial level, courtyards are the only material and constitutive element that defined the overall concentric, hierarchical position. In the Great Mosque of Xi'an, the five courtyards form five spatial units, each of which is relatively independent – all of them have designated functions and spatial centers. In the meantime, this composition also creates five layers boundaries between the east side of the complex (the entrance) and the west one (the place behind the prayer hall).

A hierarchical order in a concentric layout of enclosures is imposed either from the center to the periphery or from the innermost to the outermost. Typical mosques in the Middle East prefer to employ the former while Chinese mosques adopt the latter. In the Great Mosque of Xi'an, the multiple courtyard layout imposes a social hierarchy by placing the activity of pray and its place, the prayer hall, with the highest status at the innermost locations while other non-pray activities and spaces at less significant locations. The hierarch of the prayer hall can also be evidenced by the large, erected platform leading people to the prayer hall from the 4th courtyard which makes the prayer hall spatially higher than all other buildings in the complex.

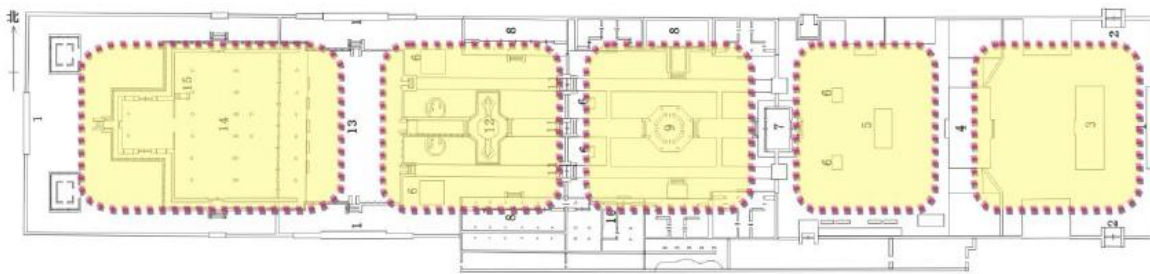


Figure 5 Courtyards encircled the whole complex down to smaller spatial units.

Located at the inner center, the prayer hall of the Xi'an case assumed the higher status and claimed the best spatial resources. Hence, the prayer hall was the biggest, highest and most exquisitely decorated of the whole complex of the Great Mosque of Xi'an. Other activities such as teaching or ablution are usually concentrated in the outer compounds, such as the 2nd or the 3rd courtyard, which represented a lower position, implying less religious significance. The spatial segregation formed by courtyards created a spatial hierarchical framework of a higher inside and a lower outside just like a higher central and a lower periphery in cases from mosques in the Middle East. Naturally, the more courtyards that are inserted, the more hierarchies are created and the higher the inner becomes.

There is a dialectic relationship between the courtyards in the Great Mosque of Xi'an. The courtyards dissected space into fragments, while the openings connect and integrate the spatial fragments. The openings, in the form of gates and archways in the Xi'an case, have critical effects in the exercise of connection on the two sides of the courtyards. Although

openings are the locations where space and human activities move across or overcome the courtyard, they are also the points where the control and defense are reinforced. Only through the openings can the inside and outside space establish an asymmetry. This demonstrates the different religious hierarchs: the inside is more religious while the outside is less religious. Going to the prayer hall from the entrance is an experience of religious ascending from the outside to the inside (Fig. 8). Through the boundaries defined by courtyards, doors and archways have successfully created a spatial sequence, which strongly demonstrates the differences of the inside prayer hall and the outside streets – this reflects the difference between an Islamic place and a non-Islamic place.

When a Muslim go through different courtyards from the street to the prayer hall, he passes through various distances, experiencing alternate spatial changes between the interior and exterior. He is also undergoing a spatial promotion from the lower to the higher step by step with increasing religious significances. The perception of space reached its peak when he arrives at the prayer hall, the climax of the spatial progression and sequence. In addition, this spatial sequence stimulates a strong desire to continue the discovery of the inner space that is concealed by courtyards, which increases the fascination of the innermost space.

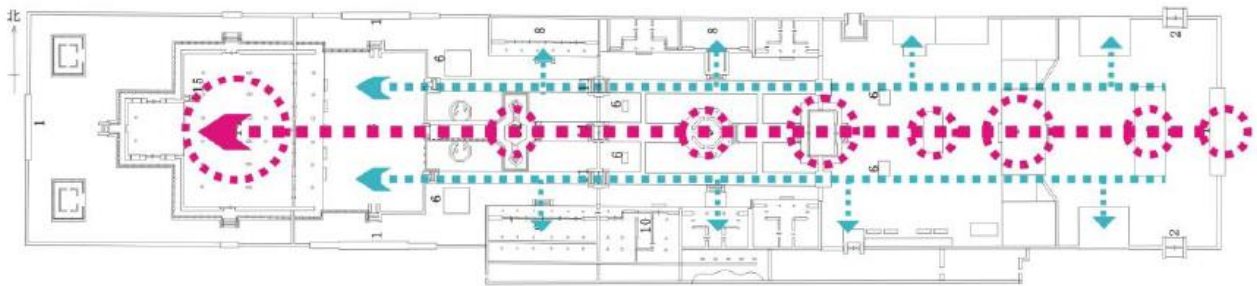


Figure 6 the axis-based spatial sequence promotes an experience of religious ascending.

4. A Cross-Cultural Converge

It is obvious that the religious functionality is the top priority of all mosque buildings worldwide. However, the transmission and development of Islam in China showcases a different path compared to its counterparts in the Middle East. Islam had to face China’s long cultural traditions of “Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian and imperial monuments in the cities and countryside for nearly 1400 years.” (Steinhardt N. S., 2015, p. xix). This leads to the fact that many Chinese mosques tend to employ the language of Chinese architecture for the purpose of Islamic representation.

In the Great Mosque of Xi’an, the entire complex followed the traditional axuality of Chines urbanity, but instead of south-north axis, it is oriented toward the west, with the main prayer hall at the west end of the axis. Furthermore, entering the five-courtyard arrangement with its main entrance from behind a freestanding screen wall, or the *yingbi*, resembles as much as a Buddhist or Daoist monastery more than a mosque (Steinhardt N. S., 2015, p. 147). Shengxinlou, the

Chinese-style three-story octagonal tower, serves here as a minaret in Xi'an Mosque (Fig 9). The most obvious non-Chinese features in Xi'an Mosque is the Arabic calligraphy inscriptions that take place in the stone gateways and the prayer hall. The prayer hall interior decoration with its vegetal and floral scheme has strong resemblance to that of Middle East earlier mosques.

For the Chinese, Islam was an imported religion and, therefore, mosque was an imported building type. There was no existing culture inside China to shape the Islamic place when Islam was introduced to heart of China in the 7th and 8th Century. In the meantime, Chinese builders lacked basic knowledge and skills to produce the same kind of Islamic spaces as the patterns in the Middle East. The Islamic buildings from the Middle East possessed a great deal of distinguish architectural features from the thousands-years-old Chinese building systems, which became a strong reminder of the Islam's foreign origin and consequently formed a barrier to transmit the Islamic belief to a larger group of people (Steinhardt, 2015). In addition, it was a common practice in China to donate a local residence and transform it into a religious place during the earlier stage of an imported religion, such as Buddhism and Islam (Steinhardt, 2015). Thus, it was a natural choice that mosques in pre-modern China adopted the Chinese forms to define Islamic essences.

However, as a spatial product of an imported religion, the architectural features of mosques should support the needs of Islamic activities and representations. Compared to other religious temples in China, mosques play more significant roles in Muslims' daily lives. According to Islamic needs, they are not only a place for religious pray but also a place for many other uses. First, a mosque is a cultural center of local Muslims – within a non-Islamic context, a mosque is the only primary facility to support local Muslims' cultural activities and exchanges. Second, a mosque is a community centers of local Muslims – a mosque is also a primary place for social activities among the Islamic population who normally gather at a mosque for more purposes than praying together. Third, mosques normally support learnings of young Muslims and the spread of Islam – the teaching of *Jingtang* (meaning “scripture hall education”) is a typical form of Islamic learning conducted in mosques in North China (Dudoignon, Hisao, & Yasushi, 2006). Fourth, due to the Islamic procedure of cleaning before prayer, *Wudu*, mosques in China normally provide bathing services to local Muslims' worship activities and daily lives (Zhang, 1981).

As a mixed-use facility, the Great Mosque of Xi'an employs the five courtyards to create five relatively independent but connected spatial units, each accommodate multiple uses and needs. It has borrowed forms from different building types in old China that can be easily identified and recognized by local users.

In the first courtyard, a three-bay wooded archway (Fig. 9) stands at the entrance, marking the beginning of the sequence of five-courtyard. In general, this form is seen at the entrance of Confucian temples (also called “Temples of Literature”) which house the administration of China's imperial examinations and government-sponsored schools. Therefore, the form of the archway is considered as a symbol of learning in the Chinese context. Through this symbol, the Great Mosque of Xi'an informs its users that the first courtyard of this mosque is a learning place of Islam.



Figure 7 The three-bay wooded archway at the entrance (photo by the author)

In the middle of the second courtyard stands a three-bay stone doorway, which are normally the structure of official recognition of individuals' achievements, behaviors, or moral traits in ancient China, demonstrating traditional cultural values (Fig. 10). As a symbol of culture, the stone doorway announces the second courtyard is mainly used for cultural events of local Muslim. A tower, the "Pavilion for Introspection" stands in the middle of the third courtyard, the tallest structure of the whole complex. Interpreted as a minaret within the mosque, it fully adopts the form of traditional pagoda that are identical to that in Buddhist temples. Traditionally, pagodas in those Buddhist temples are centers of local public life. As a result, the "Pavilion for Introspection" suggests the center of Muslim community life is located inside the mosque. The Phoenix Pavilion dominates the fourth courtyard. With two wings in smaller size, the form of this pavilion is a typical element of Chinese garden where people enjoy leisure times. This allows local Muslims to be aware that the mosque is not just a place for former religious activities such as prayer but also a place of appreciating life.

The prayer hall, the most significant building of the whole complex, is in the fifth courtyard. The Islamic prayer defined by Islamic rules has unique requirements of space that none of traditional Chinese building forms can support. This makes the emergence of a new form necessary. The Great Mosque of Xi'an shows the birth of Chinese Islamic Prayer Hall – it is comprised of three parts with a joint roof: the front hall, the prayer hall, and the rear hall (Fig.11). The front hall is at the east end of the prayer hall and is the place where people take off their shoes before going into the prayer hall. The prayer hall hosts a large open space for hundreds to pray at the same time. The rear hall is built to define the location of *Mihrab* where the imam leads the prayer. However, all of those Islamic activities are supported by three Chinese gable and hip roofs connected together. Based on the ranking of Chinese roofs, the Chinese gable and hip roof is used for most important non-imperial buildings. This indicates that the prayer hall has the highest spatial hierarchy within the whole complex.



Figure 10 The three-bay stone doorway at the second courtyard. (photo by the author)

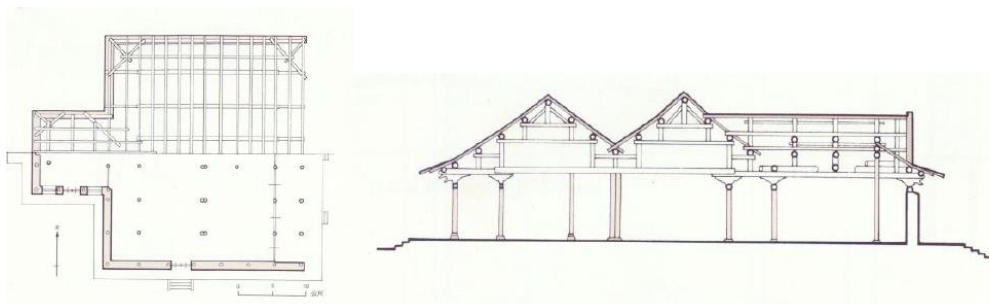


Figure 11 The floor plan and the section of the prayer hall. (Source: Liu, 2011)

5. Conclusion

Islam is an imported religion in China. Normally, there are two choices to make architectural forms reflect an imported religion: 1) borrowing the original forms from the place of the imported religion; or 2) modifying indigenous forms to meet the needs of the imported religion. For early mosques built in China, taking the former choice would lead to more barriers to spread Islam into a society that had been well developed with its religious and cultural values. On the other hand, although the latter choice required more complicated efforts and longer time, it made Islam to be better accepted and accessed by local Chinese people.

The Great Mosque of Xi'an demonstrate an excellent example of how Chinese forms can be used to deliver the meaning of Islam. Constructed by Chinese elements and approaches, this mosque strategically employs forms and defines relationships to create Islamic symbolism that becomes a pattern of Chinese mosques in later years.

An essential difference of mosques between the patterns in the Middle East and China can be tracked back to the differences of building materials. In the Middle East, local techniques of bricks and stones incorporated with those from ancient Rome brought by Alexander's conquer

and developed a set of complicated architectural vocabularies that were later adopted to mosques. The Chinese had a long history of making wooden buildings for all purposes of life. This fundamental difference led to different understanding of spaces and different application of forms and compositions. However, mosques in China attempt to combine elements from both sides to produce symbols that can trigger a larger scale of shared values and identities. The Great Mosque of Xi'an provides solid evidence of this approach – it clearly indicates buildings are carriers of culture and tradition.

Another essential difference lies in the context – in China, Muslims have always been a minority group, which make them have stronger urged needs for internal cohesion by highlighting the unique shared identity. This identity should be obviously different from the mainstream society. As a result, the Great Mosque of Xi'an clearly displays the social differences through spatial boundaries defined by a series of courtyards. In addition, the religious significance is expressed in a hierarchic order – the inside hosts more important Islamic activities while the outside is associated more non-Islamic activities. Hence, the courtyards in the Xi'an Mosque contribute to separating spaces to dissect human activities in order to distinct Muslims from non-Muslims.

On the other hand, like all other mosques across the world, the Great Mosque of Xi'an is a place of “togetherness” – it is a mixed-use facility to create a sense of Muslim community and to support diverse needs of local Muslim population. Its five courtyards divide the whole complex into five smaller spatial units, each of which is relatively independent while well connected by courtyards. This relatively independence of space makes it possible to borrow different building forms from the Chinese society and place them together into one building complex. Each built form represents a type of spatial use that becomes easily recognized by local people. With the flexibility offered by different courtyards, the mosque becomes the place where Muslims not only pray together but also study together, live together, and play together. Through playing as an active spatial agent of defining separating and togetherness, courtyards make the Chinese and Islamic architecture finally converged together.

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