

Analysis of Islamic Cultural Architecture in Xinjiang: Historical Evolution, Artistic Features, and Influence on Modern Architectural Design

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical background, formation process, artistic features, and style of Islamic cultural architecture in Xinjiang, as well as its impact on modern architectural design. Xinjiang, a vast region located on the northwestern frontier of China, has been a core area of the Silk Road since ancient times, witnessing the convergence and integration of various cultures and religions. The style of Islamic cultural architecture in Xinjiang gradually formed based on the exchange and fusion of diverse cultures, reflecting the combination of multi-ethnic cultures in the region while also absorbing the essence of Central Asian and Arab styles and innovating upon them. The main characteristics of this architectural style include a clear central axis, symmetrical left and right sides, a deep longitudinal plane for prayer halls, and towering minarets, which give Xinjiang's Islamic architecture a strong visual impact and distinct recognizability. Xinjiang Islamic cultural architecture is not only a construction of physical space but also a representation of spiritual beliefs and cultural traditions. In the context of globalization, this architectural style with distinct regional characteristics and cultural connotations holds significant importance for promoting social progress and development, as well as facilitating cultural exchange and integration.

Keywords

Xinjiang; Islamic culture; Architecture; Cultural heritage.

1. Historical Background and Formation Process

Mystical Xinjiang is located on the northwestern frontier of China, at the heart of the Eurasian continent. This vast land has been home to the ancient Silk Road, nurturing a rich tapestry of ethnic cultures. During the spread of Islam, it absorbed various cultural elements into Xinjiang. As the primary religion of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang, Islam has profoundly influenced Xinjiang's economy, culture, architecture, and language over its long history. Particularly in architecture, it vividly showcases unique aesthetic arts and ethnic culture. Xinjiang lies at the core region of the Silk Road, historically a convergence point for multiple cultures and religions. This provided favorable conditions for the introduction of Islam. By the end of the 9th century and the beginning of the 10th century, Islam was finally introduced into Xinjiang, marked by the establishment of the Atushi Grand Mosque and Satuk Bughra Khan's acceptance of Islam ^[1]. After the rulers of the Karakhanid Khanate declared their conversion to Islam, Islam further spread in Xinjiang. According to historical records, the introduction of Islam into Xinjiang was a long and complex process involving multiple stages and various factors. This process not only altered Xinjiang's religious landscape but also profoundly influenced its cultural and social structures. The shifts in religious popularity and belief inevitably reflected in architecture and urban development. The introduction of Islam brought its unique symbols and decorative techniques, such as pointed arches and geometric patterns, which significantly enriched the

content of local Xinjiang architecture. The initial formation of Islamic architectural style in Xinjiang can be traced back to the late 7th century AD. At that time, Arabs entered Central Asia and Xinjiang region of China, spreading Islam, which gradually became the dominant religion in the area [2]. The architecture of Uyghur Islamic religious buildings originated in southern Xinjiang centered around Kashgar and gradually spread northward [3]. This architectural style, influenced by Central Asian Arab styles, gradually developed into a unique form that combines with traditional Uyghur styles [4].

2. Xinjiang Islamic Cultural Architecture

The Islamic architectural style in Xinjiang gradually formed on the basis of diverse cultural exchanges and integration, reflecting the combination of Uyghur culture with Han Chinese culture from central China, as well as the absorption and innovation of Central Asian Arab styles [5]. When Islam was introduced to Xinjiang, it coincided with the prosperous Tang Dynasty of China, exerting significant influence on the region. Prior to this, Xinjiang had already developed a social environment where Han Chinese and local populations coexisted for long periods. Consequently, Islamic architecture naturally integrated closely with Han culture upon its introduction. Key features include: a clear central axis, emphasis on left-right symmetry, orientation towards the west for prayer and the sacred well, the establishment of a prominent minaret along the axis, a deep-plan prayer hall with vaulted ceilings, gable roofs with arched eaves, and pavilion-style hexagonal or octagonal pyramidal roofs.

As a region with multiple ethnic groups and religions, the interaction of different cultures impacts Xinjiang's traditional culture, which is reflected in architectural forms through the fusion and development of local traditional architectural elements with various foreign architectural elements. The Hami Huiwang Mausoleum (see Figure 1) serves as an excellent example of this integration, combining styles from Central Asian Islamic architecture, Chinese Han wooden structures, and Mongolian architectural styles for ministerial tombs. Islamic religious architecture refers to buildings closely associated with Islamic doctrines (including mosques, mausoleums, and madrasas), which were also referred to as 'Islamic architecture' by predecessors. It is not merely a product of Xinjiang's Islamic culture but also reflects the unique expressions of Xinjiang's Muslim believers in architectural construction and decorative arts. Among these, mausoleum architecture more distinctly represents the architectural style under Xinjiang's Islamic culture. Mausoleum is an Arabic term that translates to 'place of visitation' or 'sacred tomb'. Mazar is a type of Islamic mausoleum architecture in Xinjiang (see Figure 2), specifically designed for the burial and veneration of Islamic saints and prominent figures. Typically, it consists of structures such as a main gate, walls, courtyards, and tomb chambers. Some also feature domed pavilions used for religious activities, while certain regions may have mosques and Quranic schools with extensive endowment properties. Managed by Sheiks and Imams, almost every village has a Uyghur mosque, which features a free layout with distinct characteristics. The prayer hall must face westward towards east to ensure that worshippers, when praying facing the niche on the back wall of the prayer hall, are oriented towards Mecca's Kaaba.

In Xinjiang, Islamic cultural architecture is not limited to mosques and mausoleums but also integrates elements of Han Chinese architectural styles from central China, resulting in a unique regional architectural style. For instance, Islamic architecture in the Kashgar region primarily employs wooden structures, brick-wood structures, and brick structures, giving rise to architectural forms that complement these constructions, such as wooden columns, flat roofs, dense beams, and domed roofs. Furthermore, the spatial layout of the old city of Kashgar has been influenced by traditional Islamic urban planning, leading to a residential pattern centered around mosques, known as 'living around the mosque'.



Figure 1. The Tomb of the Hui King in Hami, Xinjiang



Figure 2. Sulitang Mausoleum in Xinjiang

Domes are emblematic of Islamic architecture. Despite its widespread distribution across various regions, Islamic architecture frequently showcases domes. Compared to European domes, those in Islamic architecture often appear rugged yet rich in charm. This dome structure is also widely used in Islamic architecture in Xinjiang, becoming one of its prominent features.

2.1. Artistic Characteristics and Style

The Islamic architectural decorative arts of Xinjiang feature unique characteristics, integrating various cultural elements such as Greek Byzantine art, Persian Sassanian art, and Arab art. These decorative arts not only possess practical and aesthetic values but also embody rich regional environments, folk customs, and aesthetic significance. The architecture of Xinjiang's Islamic culture primarily employs wooden structures, brick-wood structures, and brick structures. Their carving decorations are diverse, encompassing wood carvings, brick carvings, and plaster floral designs. Wood carvings are the most common due to the ease of obtaining raw materials and their convenience for carving. Brick carvings have the advantage of easy preservation, while plaster floral designs are vibrant and colorful with varied patterns. Regardless of the decorative technique used, they are rich in variation and unique characteristics, reflecting the artistic and aesthetic values of Islamic culture. The influence of Islamic culture on architecture is mainly manifested in decorative arts and geometric patterns rather than specific architectural forms [6]. Islamic cultural architecture also extensively employs geometric patterns, which typically avoid direct depictions of biological forms and instead express natural laws through geometric shapes [7]. The architectural decorations of Islamic culture are unparalleled worldwide, characterized by unique themes, compositions, lines, and color usage. In Xinjiang's Islamic architecture, these decorations are extensively applied to walls, windows, doors, and columns, creating a rich variety of visual effects.

3. Influence on Modern Architectural Design

After Islamic architectural styles were introduced to Xinjiang, they did not completely replace the local architectural styles but instead merged with indigenous culture, creating a unique Xinjiang Uyghur architectural style. With the passage of time and advancements in technology, the Xinjiang Uyghur architectural style has continued to innovate and evolve. For instance, in the design of the modern architectural marvel Burj Khalifa, the building's form resembles a giant flower, with petal-shaped structures providing robust support for the tower, drawing inspiration from Islamic culture. Some traditional Islamic cultural architectural elements have been reinterpreted in new forms and meanings, resulting in a style that is both traditional and meets modern aesthetic needs. This architectural style has had a profound impact on contemporary architectural design. It reinterprets traditional architectural forms through modern techniques or incorporates the essence of Islamic culture into the design, enriching the language and expressiveness of modern architectural design while promoting cultural diversity and architectural innovation. In contemporary architectural design, designers incorporate the spiritual core of Islamic culture, giving their works deeper cultural significance.

4. Summary

Islamic cultural architecture is not merely the construction of physical spaces but also the embodiment of spiritual beliefs and cultural traditions. In the context of globalization, cultural diversity has become a crucial driving force for social progress and development. The architectural style of Islamic culture in Xinjiang serves as an important cultural heritage with distinct regional characteristics and rich cultural connotations. The integration of this architectural style not only promotes exchanges and integration among different cultures but also brings new inspiration and creativity to modern architectural design. Through the platform of modern architectural design, people can more intuitively feel the charm and value of different cultures, thereby enhancing mutual understanding and respect.

Marginal Notes

- ① Figure 1 Source: Web reference, <https://www.tsfqw.com/articlexq/1050.html>
- ② Figure 2 Source: Web reference, <https://www.tsfqw.com/articlexq/810.html>

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