

The Multiplicity of Mosque Architecture in China

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Introduction

Mosques in China offer a valuable opportunity to examine how Islamic architecture takes shape in diverse cultural and historical settings. While mosque forms commonly associated with the contemporary Middle East often dominate popular representations, the Chinese examples highlight the wide range of architectural expressions that fulfill Islamic religious functions. These buildings reflect the ways Muslim communities in China have engaged with local materials, building traditions, and political structures over time.

Studying mosque architecture in China prompts critical reflection on concepts such as adaptation, continuity, and cultural translation. It challenges students to reconsider assumptions about what constitutes Islamic architecture and encourages analysis of how religious identity is expressed through built form. These sites also serve as case studies in the interaction between regional and transregional networks, offering insight into how global traditions are interpreted and reshaped within local contexts.

Engaging with this material cultivates skills that are broadly transferable: reading architecture as a form of historical evidence, comparing visual and spatial systems across cultures, and approaching religious heritage with attention to context and complexity. Whether for courses in Islamic art, Chinese history, or global architectural traditions, the study of mosques in China opens space for a more expansive and inclusive understanding of both Islam and Asia.

This pedagogy file presents resources directly relevant to the teaching session in the main text. Related but supplementary topics and materials of potential interest to instructors are provided in the footnotes.

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Learning Objectives

- Develop an understanding that Islam has been practiced in China since the first Islamic century and that, given the faith group's long history of interaction with both local and translocal traditions, mosque architecture in China is far from monolithic.
- Gain the ability to read, analyze, and compare mosque floor plans across different historical and regional contexts.
- Recognize that the formal features of mosques in China are shaped by diverse regional traditions.
- Acknowledge the limits of definitions like a “pure” or “hybrid” mosque architecture when discussing Muslim communities in China. Understand that notions of what constitutes an “authentic” Muslim or Chinese structure have evolved over time and continue to be shaped by contemporary geopolitics and visual cultures.

General Bibliography for Further Reading

Liu Zhiping 劉致平. *Zhongguo Yisilanjiao Jianzhu* 中國伊斯蘭教建築. Beijing: Zhongguo Jianzhu Gongye Chubanshe, 2010.

Muzium Kesenian Islam Malaysia. *Six Centuries of Islamic Art in China*. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, 2001.

Park, Hyunhee. *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds: Cross-Cultural Exchange in Pre-Modern Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Pew Research Center. “[Measuring Religion in China: Islam](#).” *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, August 30, 2023.

Smith Finley, Jo. “Islam in China.” *Oxford Bibliographies Online in Chinese Studies*, last updated November 30, 2015.

Steinhardt, Nancy Shatzman. *China's Early Mosques*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

Selected Digital Resources

[Archnet](#)

[Islamic Architecture in China](#) by Takeo Kamiya

[China Gallery](#) at Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

[Islam in China](#) at the David Collection

Case Studies

This pedagogy file presents three case studies that may be used individually, in pairs, or as a set. These sites, indicated on the map below, are located across China's varied territories. They are not intended as representations of regional types but have been selected to support teaching units focused on different geographic contexts.



Fig. 1.

Map with labels indicating city and province for the three case study sites.
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Source: Map of China from [Wikimedia Commons](#), annotations of mosque sites added by the author.

Case Study 1: The Ashab Mosque: A Stone Mosque on the Southern Coast

Site and Location

The Ashab Mosque (lit. “the Mosque of the Prophet’s Companions”), also known in Chinese as *Shengyou Si* 聖友寺 or *Qingjing Si* 清淨寺, is located in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, on China’s southeastern coast. Historically, Quanzhou was one of the world’s busiest ports, referred to as *Zaytūn* by Arab, Persian, and European merchants. During the Song and Yuan dynasties (tenth to fourteenth centuries), in particular, it was a prosperous trading and cultural hub in the Indian Ocean world, with a cosmopolitan population of Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Manichaeans, and others.¹

1. A useful resource for understanding the history, particularly the material aspects, of the medieval city is Angela Schottenhammer, ed., *The Emporium of the World: Maritime Quanzhou, 1000–1400* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

Fig. 2.

The Ashab Mosque, Quanzhou, China.

© Zhang-zhugang (creator)
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

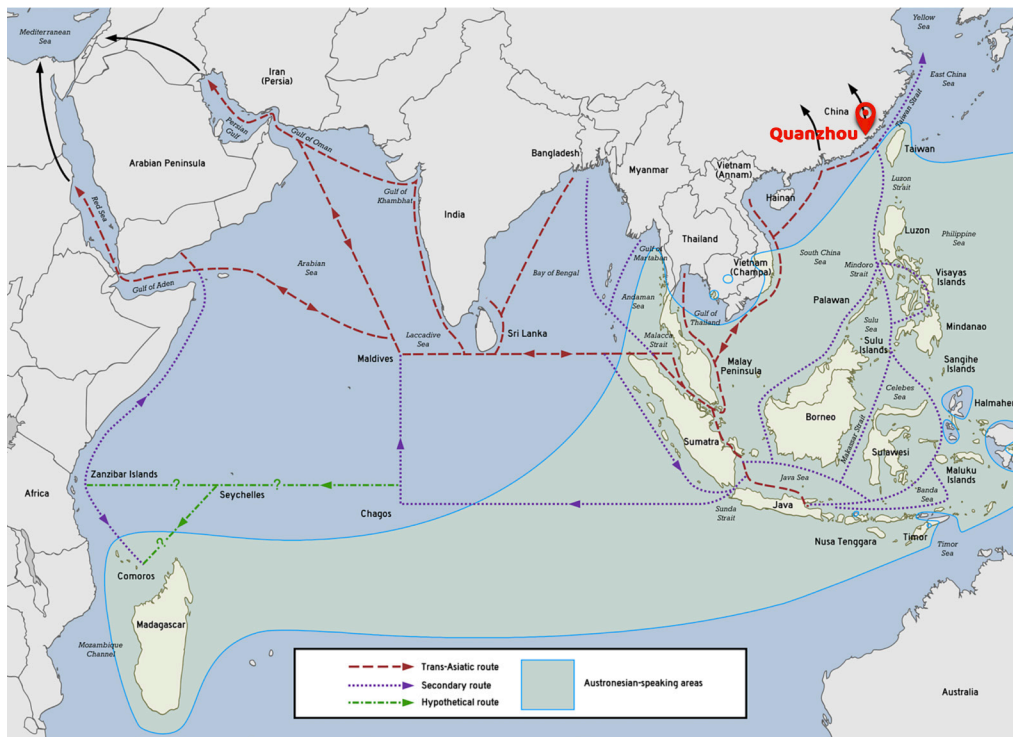


Fig. 3. Austronesian maritime trade network: during the height of Quanzhou’s participation in the Indian Ocean trade, the city’s engagement with the wider world was initially mediated through this maritime network, particularly via Southeast Asia, which served as a conduit for the flow of goods between China and the broader Indian Ocean world. © Obsidian Soul (creator).

Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), Quanzhou’s location added by the author.

The mosque site is today part of Quanzhou's main urban area but was historically located beyond the confines of the inner walled city (*zicheng*, marked by the innermost jagged wall depicted in Fig. 4). Some attribute this location to historical restrictions in Quanzhou that limited the construction of religious buildings within the city's fortified zones—a privilege likely reserved for officially recognized or state-endorsed faiths. While this is a plausible explanation, the mosque's proximity to the port and river, where several other foreign communities were also located, highlights the significance of maritime connections in shaping Quanzhou's religious landscape as well.



Fig. 4.

Map showing the distribution of Quanzhou's mosques in the fourteenth century, as displayed in the exhibit hall inside the Ashab Mosque site (in red).
© Photo by the author.

Background and Key Points

Foundation and Development

The foundation inscription located above the exit of the entrance portal dates the mosque's initial establishment to AH 400 (1009–10 CE), making it one of the oldest extant mosques in China. The same inscription informs us that a major reconstruction occurred around AH 700 (1310–11 CE) with funds provided by someone from the Iranian city of Shiraz.

Architectural Singularity

The mosque as reconstructed in the fourteenth century, which is also how it stands today, was built entirely from stone (granite and diabase).² This departs significantly from the majority of premodern mosques in China which relied on timber frame construction. Its monumental entryway portal and arched niches and doorways drew more from exchanges

2. Quanzhou has a long history of masonry and stone building construction both beyond the Muslim community and before the fourteenth century. The Purtle article in the suggested activities section provides a window into this shared skill and visual vocabulary. At the same time, Mongol rule substantially increased China's engagement with other Muslim societies, many of which present contemporary examples of stone mosques of prominence that might have served as models for the reconstruction of the Ashab Mosque.

with Egyptian, Iranian, and/or South Asian building traditions than from architectural practices commonly associated with medieval China. This interregional circulation of built forms has long attracted scholarly attention, but the exact conduit remains unclear.

A Cultural Palimpsest

While the mosque exhibits architectural features more commonly associated with buildings in North Africa, West Asia, and South Asia, many of its structural and decorative motifs reflect the craftsmanship and aesthetic sensibilities of fourteenth-century Quanzhou, a city simultaneously shaped by and shared between Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Christian, and Daoist traditions.

Suggested activity using Jennifer Purtle, “Salvaging Meaning: The Art of Recycling in Sino-Mongol Quanzhou, ca. 1276–1408,” *The Medieval Globe* 6, no. 1 (2020): 57–91.

- Purtle’s article introduces us to the intriguing phenomenon of Quanzhou’s multiple communities sharing and repurposing architectural elements, imagery, and iconography across religious boundaries. By analyzing Buddhist, Islamic, Christian, and Brahmanic monuments, it shows how recycled materials and visual motifs created new meanings and supported what she calls a “postglobal” art history rooted in a deeper understanding of local material practices.
- An effective in-class activity would be to divide students into small groups, each assigned one of the article’s four main sections (imagery reuse, iconographic repurposing, reproductive modules, and reinstalled components) and task them with analyzing specific case studies from that section to present how visual culture mediated cross-cultural interactions.
- Since the Ashab Mosque is one of the architectural examples Purtle’s article analyzes, this activity would help students contextualize the multicultural approaches taken at the mosque site by encouraging them to recognize how structural and artistic elements of the mosque may reflect similar patterns of reuse and adaptation in Quanzhou’s other religious sites. Students can then better understand the Ashab Mosque not just as an isolated Islamic site in the city, but as part of a broader, dynamic landscape shaped by intercultural exchanges and negotiated identities.

Visual Analysis of Key Components

Entryway Portal

- A tripartite arched gateway, featuring pointed arches, ribbed domes, and ornamental crenellations.
- Scholars have called the portal a *pishtāq*, a term commonly used to describe an arched gateway that often accentuates the entrance of a mosque, madrasa, or shrine.³

3. For more on this term, see Leslee Michelson, “*Pishtaq*,” *Khamseen: Islamic Art History Online*. Using an established term to describe the structure can effectively evoke prior knowledge and draw formal connections between architectural examples across regions. However, when time allows, instructors might also encourage students to consider what could be lost in translation, particularly when applying a familiar name to a feature whose original building context and purpose remain only partially understood.

- Architectural parallels may be drawn to sites such as the *Zāwiya Zayn al-Dīn Yūsuf* in Cairo, Egypt, the *Friday Mosque of Yazd* in Iran, and the *Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra Mosque* in Ajmer, India.

Architectural Epigraphy: Between Production and Symbolism

Another feature that suggests engagement with the architectural traditions of Muslim-majority societies is the mosque's monumental epigraphy. Comprising mostly Qur'anic excerpts, the Ashab Mosque's epigraphic program likely served theological, ritual, and commemorative purposes. The inscriptions appear to have been carefully curated so that diverse audiences—including laypeople, mosque caretakers, and theologians—could derive different meanings from the same textual selections. This layered reading is modeled in my *Khamseen* video essay "*The Ashab Mosque in Quanzhou: A Coastal Mosque in South China*" [3:51–6:40].

A worthwhile teaching point, though slightly abstract for students not familiar with the Arabic script, is the material quality of these inscriptions. While one might be quick to focus on their textual and symbolic meanings, the inscriptions are also a physical presence, likely the product of close collaboration between calligraphers and masons.

- An interesting detail that can help students engage with the inscriptions' production process and gain a more concrete understanding of craftsmanship hides in the niches along the prayer hall's west wall. While most niches contain complete Qur'anic verses, the inscription panels in two consecutive niches reveal a moment of technical flexibility.
- As shown in Figure 5, part of the inscription corresponding to Qur'an 24:35–36 does not fit within its intended niche (right) and has been carried over into the adjacent niche (left), which features Qur'an 24:37–38 and 33:56 (note that Arabic is read from right to left).
- This minor adjustment suggests that the epigraphic program was most likely executed on-site, with the change provided by experienced workers and serving as a practical solution. This detail raises several questions for discussion: Does this suggest the presence of a master calligrapher in Quanzhou at the time of the mosque's construction? Could they have come from outside China? And what might this tell us about the movement of architectural expertise and skilled artisans across regions?⁴
- For students familiar with Arabic paleography, instructors might consider dividing the class into small groups and ask each group to compare the inscriptions inside the Ashab Mosque with examples of monumental epigraphy from other parts of the world and examine whether the scripts share common features or differ from one another.
- The sensorial experience of Qur'anic recitation prompted by the mosque's epigraphic program could also be envisioned here: from carved words to vocalized verses and the guided movements within the mosque during ritual practice.⁵

4. These will be open-ended explorations. In the absence of known artisan information, there is currently no consensus on how the inscriptions at the Ashab Mosque were produced. However, this uncertainty presents an opportunity for instructors to show students how archaeologists and art historians have employed similar methods elsewhere and to draw connections across regions.

5. While a detailed, site-specific analysis of the Ashab Mosque's calligraphic program that evokes senses



Q 24:37-38, 33:56

...in the morning and the evenings.
(24:36) [Are] men whom neither commerce nor sale distracts from the remembrance of Allah and performance of prayer and giving of zakah. They fear a Day in which the hearts and eyes will [fearfully] turn about (24:37)

That Allah may reward them [according to] the best of what they did and increase them from His bounty. And Allah gives provision to whom He wills without account. (24:38)

Indeed, Allah confers blessing upon the Prophet, and His angels [ask Him to do so]. O you who have believed, ask [Allah to confer] blessing upon him and ask [Allah to grant him] peace. (33:56)

Q 24:35-36

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. Allah guides to His light whom He wills. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things. (24:35)

[Such niches are] in mosques which Allah has ordered to be raised and that His name be mentioned therein; exalting Him within them... (24:36)

Fig. 5. Illustrations of the movement of part of the first niche’s inscription (top right) into the top of the second niche (top left) and a diagram showing the full transcription and translation of the Qur’anic verses inscribed inside the two niches (bottom right and left).

© Photos and annotations by the author.

beyond sight is not yet available, one can return to foundational texts such as Oleg Grabar’s *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) to discuss how inscriptions, as a form of monumental ornamentation, can be both visual and verbal and affect how viewers engage and navigate space.

Prayer Hall

- Near square floor plan, with the mihrab situated in a salient projected from the center of the qibla wall. This layout is unique within China among extant mosques.
- Potentials for a locally-minded design: a 1609 stele interprets the mosque's numerical features using Daoist cosmology. Concepts like *Taiji* (unity), *Yin-Yang* (duality), *Sixiang* (quartets), and *Bagua* (octets) are correlated to the mosque's door/window counts. This indicates the development of localized epistemological readings of the mosque design.

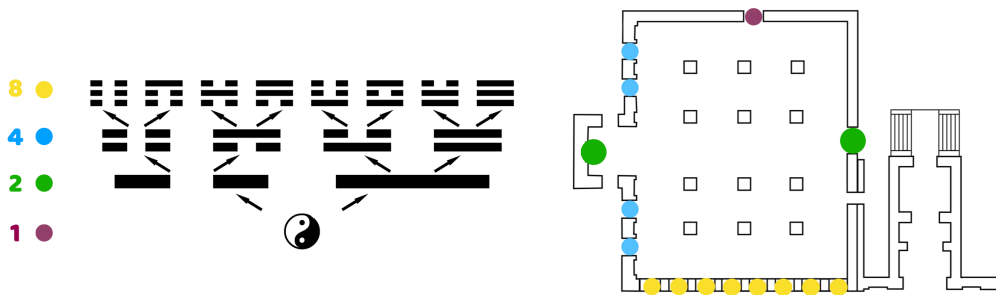


Fig. 6. Diagrams showing the numerical sequences of the prayer hall's openings (right) corresponding to the development from Taiji to Bagua (left).

© Taiji to Bagua diagram by PnkV (creator)

Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), mosque floorplan and annotations by the author.



Fig. 7. Columns standing inside the prayer hall. © Photo by the author.

- The column bases remaining in the prayer hall suggest that a total of twelve columns once stood there. Similar to interpretations of the prayer hall's openings discussed above, some local Chinese sources view this number as symbolic of the twelve months of the year. These columns are believed to have been repurposed from nearby Buddhist temples during the twentieth century—a practice with precedents in the premodern period. This offers a modern example of the reuse of materials across the city's various religious communities (students can again refer to Jennifer Purtle's article for this practice).

Questions for Discussion

1. Which components of the Ashab Mosque align with widely practiced Islamic architectural traditions observed in various parts of the world and which components appear to be idiosyncratic and unique to this site in southern China?
2. How does our concept of Islamic architecture change when a mosque prominently features local traditions associated with other religions? How might this question be answered differently by various stakeholders (local worshippers, historians, state institutions)?
3. The uncertainty and layered identity markers present at the mosque site, though challenging for students to grapple with, provide a valuable opportunity to explore questions around originality: does it matter where a form is first created and, if so, to what extent? This discussion is well-suited to upper-level seminar-style courses and students with some background in the historiography of Islamic art and architecture. Possible questions to pose include: Does the Ashab Mosque's source of inspiration need to be understood as an either/or proposition? Is it more appropriate to describe the mosque as a "hybrid" structure—a term that, while commonly used, carries its own complexities—or as a site of cultural mosaic? What is the distinction between these concepts, and, in your opinion, what terminology might best capture the nature of the site?

Further Reading and Suggested Activities

Chaffee, John W. *The Muslim Merchants of Premodern China: The History of a Maritime Asian Trade Diaspora, 750–1400*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

- For students interested in South China and the role of cities like Quanzhou in connecting China to the broader Islamic world, Chaffee's monograph is a great source of information.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site Nomination document for Quanzhou's inscription, prepared by China.

- **Download the file** titled "Nomination Text 2020" under "Nomination 1561rev (inscribed)" (2021).
- Description of the Ashab Mosque is on pages 161–72.
- For either an in-class discussion or an at-home assignment, students can be asked to read

the UNESCO nomination document and closely compare its language with the analysis of the site previously done with the course instructor. Students would then reflect on how the mosque site has been portrayed to support the nominator's agenda. Which elements and interpretations have been emphasized and which have been downplayed?

- Once students uncover the nuances between scholarly interpretations and state narratives, they are prompted to critically reflect on the roles of UNESCO and the World Heritage Site program in shaping public perceptions of historical sites like the Ashab Mosque and their cultural identities.

Case Study 2: Great Mosque of Xi'an: A Timber Frame Courtyard Complex in Central China

Site and Location

The Great Mosque of Xi'an, also known as *Huajuexiang Si* (化覺巷寺), is situated in the historic Muslim Quarter of Xi'an, Shaanxi Province. This inland city was once known as Chang'an, the capital of multiple Chinese dynasties and the claimed eastern terminus of the Silk Routes in Chinese state and popular discourse. As such, it was a nucleus for cultural, commercial, and religious exchanges between China, Central Asia, and the broader Islamic world.

Xi'an's Muslim community, which emerged as early as the Tang dynasty (seventh to tenth century), became more established under the Yuan and Ming dynasties. The Great Mosque's location in a dense urban neighborhood signals its integration into the everyday life of the local population.⁶ This central location contrasts with coastal mosques such as the Ashab Mosque in Quanzhou, which appear to have been positioned for easy access to ports and rivers. What might this reveal about the different roles that the Muslim communities in Xi'an and Quanzhou respectively played within their urban contexts?

In Xi'an, Muslims began arriving as early as the Tang dynasty, often serving as soldiers, translators, physicians, and intermediaries in diplomatic and commercial exchanges with the Islamic world. Some were associated with missions or services connected to the imperial court. During the Yuan and Ming periods, state policies continued to support the presence of Muslim communities, with some individuals appointed to official positions and mosque construction permitted or even facilitated. The central urban location of the Great Mosque reflects the community's long-standing presence within the city's civic life and social fabric. In comparison, Quanzhou's Muslim population, discussed in Case Study 1, was initially composed largely of merchants and sailors involved in maritime trade. The Ashab Mosque's proximity to the port suggests a more commercially oriented, diasporic community shaped by long-distance exchange and mobility.

6. Students can read more about Xi'an's urban fabric and the history of its Muslim quarter known as Huimin Jie 回民街 (lit. "Streets of the Hui") in Owen Bernstein, "[Huimin Jie: Xi'an's Muslim Quarter](#)," May 8, 2021.

Background and Key Points

Foundation and Development

The mosque's layout dates to 1392 CE during the reign of the Hongwu Emperor (1368–98 CE), founder of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE). It is believed to have received support from both the emperor himself and the famous Muslim eunuch admiral Zheng He (1371–1433/1435 CE), who later led China's maritime expeditions to the Indian Ocean.



Fig. 8. Map showing cities along the Silk Routes.

Source: UNESCO Silk Roads Programme, [launch the interactive map](#).

Yet the site may have been home to religious activities in earlier periods as well. The early Muslim presence in Chang'an emerged through a dynamic interplay of overland and maritime trade networks connecting Tang China with the Islamic world. As the eastern terminus of the overland Silk Routes, Chang'an received a steady flow of diplomats, merchants, and scholars from West and Central Asia, including Arabs, Persians, and Sogdians. Many traveled along caravan routes stretching across Central Asia, where Islam spread rapidly in the eighth century. These land-based travelers arrived via nodes like Samarkand and Dunhuang and eventually entered Chang'an as part of trade and diplomatic delegations. Concurrently, maritime routes from the Persian Gulf to Chinese ports like

Guangzhou and Yangzhou brought Muslim merchants and envoys from the central lands of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. Some of these travelers continued inland by river and canal systems, ultimately reaching the Tang capital.

It was within this context of long-distance travel and exchange that the Great Mosque of Xi'an was founded. While its current structures date primarily to the fourteenth century, the site's establishment as a religious foundation may be traced back to the mid-eighth century. This timing aligns with the documented presence of Muslims in Chang'an, whether arriving by camel caravan from Central Asia or by sea and river from southern ports.⁷ In subsequent centuries, the mosque site was renovated and expanded multiple times and has been maintained as an active site of worship to this day.

Imperial Patronage

Unlike many mosques that grew organically from merchant or local community efforts, the Xi'an mosque reflects state-level patronage and elite craftsmanship. Its grandeur and layout recall imperial Buddhist and Confucian temple complexes, reinforcing Islam's legitimacy within the Chinese sociopolitical system.

Architectural Features and Layout

- The mosque is laid out along an east–west axis to align the mihrab toward Mecca. This is distinct from the north–south orientation often seen in Chinese religious structures.
- The complex comprises five successive courtyards extending from the main entrance in the east to the prayer hall at the western end. The linear spatial progression creates a sense of ritual movement and sacred ascent and directly echoes the plans of China's most prestigious structures, such as: The Forbidden City in Beijing (see Ying-chen Ping, "[The Forbidden City](#)," *Smarthistory: The Center for Public Art History*); The Confucian Temple in Qufu; Major imperial Buddhist monasteries like [Longxing Temple](#) in Zhengding.
- These complexes typically feature long, narrow axial plans with central pathways lined by gates, pavilions, and halls.

7. A religious structure—possibly not originally intended for Muslim use—was established on the site in the mid-eighth century. Historians believe it was likely converted or rebuilt into a mosque during the Mongol era and acquired its current configuration in the early Ming period. See Liu Zhiping, "Shanxi Xi'an Shi Huajuexiangsi Qingzhensi," in *Zhongguo Yisilanjiao Jianzhu* (Beijing: Zhongguo Jianzhu Gongye Chubanshe, 2010), 114. However, the early presence of Muslim visitors in the city has been documented. The ninth-century *Akhbār al-Şīn wa-l-Hind* reports that an Ibn Wahb is said to have traveled to the Tang capital Chang'an, known as Khamdān in Arabic, by way of Guangzhou and met with the Chinese emperor. See Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfi, *Accounts of China and India*, ed. and trans. Tim Mackintosh-Smith, in *Two Arabic Travel Books* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 78–87.

Second and Third Courtyards

The next courtyards feature stone *paifang* (gates) and stele pavilions, inscribed with calligraphy commemorating historical renovations.

The third courtyard also houses the Xingxinlou (省心樓 lit. “Tower of Reflecting upon the Heart”), an octagonal, multi-story pavilion. Often (mis)identified as a minaret, it mirrors Chinese pagodas and serves a symbolic axial role similar to that of towers in elite monastic or temple complexes.



Fig. 11. Stone *paifang* gates with stele pavilions in the back. © Hugh Llewelyn (photographer)
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).



Fig. 12. Xingxinlou. © Ovedc (photographer)
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Fourth Courtyard and Yizhen Pavilion

This is a densely built area and contains lecture halls, ablution facilities, and the Yizhen Pavilion. It functions as a space of transition and contemplation.

The Yizhen Pavilion (一真亭 lit. “Pavilion of the One Truth,” sometimes referred to as the Phoenix Pavilion due to its bird-like shape) stands on a cruciform platform with side pavilions and arcades, a configuration common in Chinese garden and temple architecture for reflection and transition between spaces.



Fig. 13.

Yizhen Pavillion.
© chensiyuan (photographer)
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Fig. 14.

The prayer hall.
 © 長安城根喚朱雀
 (photographer)

Source:
[Wikimedia Commons](#).



Fifth Courtyard and Prayer Hall

The prayer hall, the spiritual heart of the mosque, is a monumental seven-by-four bay timber structure topped by a hip-gabled roof with teal-glazed tiles. It includes a recessed **mihrab niche**, decorated with floral motifs and Qur’anic inscriptions. The interior also features a richly painted **polychrome ceiling**.

- The seven-by-four bay prayer hall displays a proportion reserved in imperial architecture for halls of great importance. For example, the East Hall of **Foguang Monastery** (Tang dynasty) also has a seven-by-four bay plan.
- This modular use of bays follows Chinese building grammar, where more bays signal greater prestige. Nine-by-five bay structures, such as the Great Buddha Hall of Fengguo Monastery in Jinzhou, represent the highest-ranking halls in religious complexes.

Overall, it should be noted that while the mosque’s buildings followed a shared architectural vocabulary familiar to elite religious and secular complexes of the Ming dynasty, they were not necessarily imitations of any specific imperial structures.

Questions for Discussion

1. Can the mosque be understood as a form of “translated architecture”? What is gained and lost in the translation between Islamic function and Chinese form?
2. What role did state patronage play in establishing Islamic presence in Ming China? How does imperial sponsorship affect how we perceive the “Chineseness” or “Islamicness” of this site?
3. How does the Great Mosque of Xi’an compare to mosques primarily built under merchant patronage (like the Ashab Mosque)? What does this suggest about the geography of religious authority in imperial China?

Further Readings and Suggested Activities

George, Alain. “Direct Sea Trade Between Early Islamic Iraq and Tang China: From the Exchange of Goods to the Transmission of Ideas.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25, no. 4 (2015): 579–624.

- Students can explore early exchanges between China and the Islamic world through George’s article. It highlights Chang’an’s role while also expanding the traditional focus on overland routes by emphasizing maritime connections, thus offering a more balanced view of the interactions between the two regions.

Milwright, Marcus. “Xi’an, 1402.” In *A Story of Islamic Art*, 144–48. London: Routledge, 2023.

- This chapter offers a fascinating fictional narrative of Muslim travelers encountering a mosque in China (i.e., the Great Mosque of Xi’an) for the first time: a young Muslim woman named Aisha arrives in Ming-period Xi’an and, while navigating the city’s Muslim quarter, gradually realizes that the complex she enters is a mosque. Through her eyes, the story explores the cultural blending of Islamic religious practice with local architectural forms, while also highlighting themes of identity, adaptation, and coexistence.
- An engaging in-class activity after the previous visual analysis of the mosque site would be to have students role-play the characters in this short story. After each dialogue, students would be prompted to interpret the scenes by connecting them to relevant historical and architectural knowledge that they believe Milwright has drawn upon to construct the story’s elements and setting.

Steinhardt, Nancy Shatzman. “Chapter 6: Ox Street Mosque and Muslim Worship in or near Beijing.” In *China’s Early Mosques*, 138–53. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

- Students can also read about *Niujie* (牛街 lit. “Ox Street”), Beijing’s historic Muslim quarter where the Niujie Mosque is located (see also Shanbie Du, “[A Walk Down Ox Street—Beijing’s Historic Muslim Hub](#),” *The Contrapuntal*, May 19, 2024).
- Compare Niujie Mosque and the Great Mosque of Xi’an. They are both located in China’s imperial capitals (Beijing officially became the capital of China in 1421, during the Ming dynasty under the reign of the Yongle Emperor). What are the commonalities and differences between the two sites?

Case Study 3: The Amin Mosque: Along the Pathways to Central Asia

Site and Location

The Amin (or Sugong 蘇公) Mosque is located in Turfan, an ancient oasis city in the eastern part of Xinjiang, near the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. Like Xi'an, the city of Turfan was on a critical segment of the overland Silk Routes and likewise known historically for its multicultural legacy. The region served as a transmission point between Central Asia and China where Buddhist, Manichaean, Nestorian, and Muslim communities converged.

Background and Key Points

Foundation and Development

The site was established in 1778 during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912 CE), under the patronage of Prince Sulayman (蘇公 *Sugong*), the son of Amin Khoja (r.1733–77 CE), a local Uyghur leader loyal to the Qing court. The mosque's prominent minaret was constructed as a memorial to Amin Khoja and forms part of a larger complex that includes a mosque, courtyard, and service areas. The minaret is also known in Chinese as *Sugongta* and in Uyghur as the Amin Minaret, reflecting both its adherence to Islamic conventions and its official recognition by the Qing imperial system.

Cultural and Religious Context

- The mosque and minaret are products of Uyghur Muslim patronage, not to be conflated with the coastal Muslim merchants or the Hui (Sino-Muslim) or imperial Chinese patrons discussed in previous case studies.
- The layout and architectural idiom, including *pishtāq*, dome, minaret, and hypostyle hall, align far more closely with Central Asian mosque architecture than with Chinese religious or palatial models.
- The mosque was an active religious center and a visual statement of Uyghur identity and Islamic authority, even under Qing imperial rule.

Symbolism and Significance

Minaret as symbol: unlike minarets in China's central and coastal mosques (which are rarely prominent), the Amin Minaret is a towering symbol of Islam, intended to mark presence and power, much like its counterparts in Central Asia.

- Instructors can propose a comparison between the Xingxinlou at the Great Mosque of Xi'an, which is often considered a minaret, and the minaret at the **Huaisheng Mosque** in Guangzhou (a coastal mosque site). Students are encouraged to compare the formal features of the three different types of minarets across distinct locations and to consider how their designs negotiate between functional needs and expressions of religious identity.

- Likewise, students can compare the *īwān* structure at the Amin Minaret and the entryway portal at the Ashab Mosque. Both described as *pishtāq* by art historians, they display distinct features when placed side to side. What does this tell us about their different circuits of exchange and what conduits might have overlapped at the same time?



Fig. 15.

Exterior view of the Amin Mosque, Turfan, showing steps to terrace preceding portal.
© Christopher Little (photographer)
Source: Aga Khan Trust for Culture.



Fig. 16.

Entryway portal of the Ashab Mosque, Quanzhou.
© Shomada (photographer)
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Commemorative function: built as a memorial to a political-religious leader, the complex also functions as a political statement. It affirmed local authority under Qing oversight.

- This aspect can be compared with the Great Mosque of Xi'an which had imperial Chinese patrons and followed elite Chinese building traditions.

Visual Analysis of Key Components

The Minaret

Height: forty-four meters; the tallest premodern minaret in China

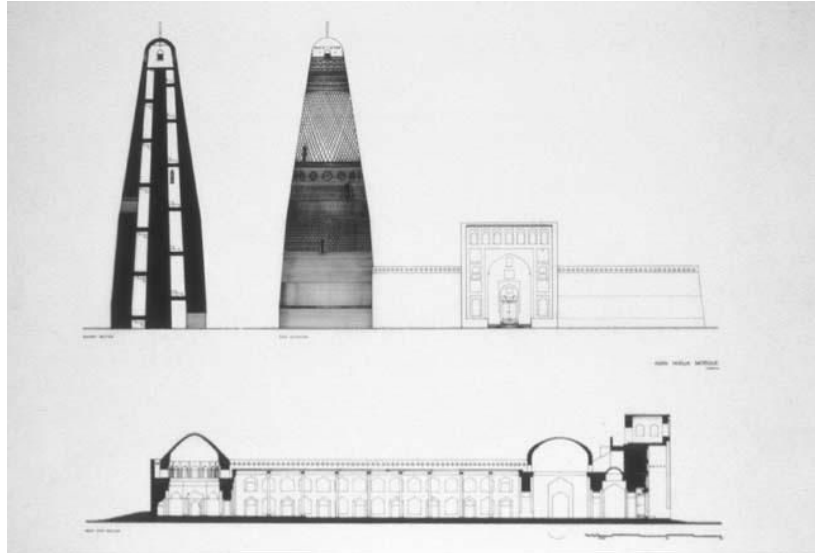
Material: Sun-dried mudbrick, a traditional Central Asian building material

Fig. 17.

Eastern elevation of mosque and minaret with minaret cross-section (top) and east-west section through mosque (bottom).

© Don Hanlon
(photographer)

Source: Rotch Visual
Collections, MIT.



Structure:

- Tapers dramatically from fourteen meters in diameter at base to 2.8 meters at top
- Sixteen bands of geometric decoration in relief, including interlaced diamonds, rosettes, and lozenges
- Interior spiral staircase with seventy-two steps and fourteen small windows for light

Stylistic Comparanda:

- **Minaret of Kutlugh Timur** in Kunya-Urgench (1011)
- **Minaret of the Kalan Mosque** in Bukhara (1127)
- **Khoja Minaret** in Khiva (1908–10)

A reflection on the transmission of architectural forms: the Amin Minaret closely resembles major minarets of Central Asia, particularly in its tall, tapered form and patterned brickwork. These similarities have led many to view the minaret as part of a larger architectural tradition rooted in the Persianate and Central Asian Islamic world. The prevailing view is that builders in Xinjiang adopted established models from these regions. However, it has also been suggested that the influence may not have flowed in only one direction. While Xinjiang builders likely drew upon Central Asian precedents, it is also possible that monuments like the Amin Minaret were known beyond China's western frontier and therefore may have contributed to the evolving architectural forms in cities further west, such as the Khiva minaret constructed in the early twentieth century. This perspective highlights the reciprocal nature of cultural exchange across Eurasia and invites us to see Xinjiang not merely as a peripheral receiver of architectural traditions in the region, but as a participant in shaping it.

The Mosque

Plan: Rectangular courtyard with axial symmetry



Fig. 18.

Exterior view of the Amin Mosque.
© Christopher Little (photographer)
Source: Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

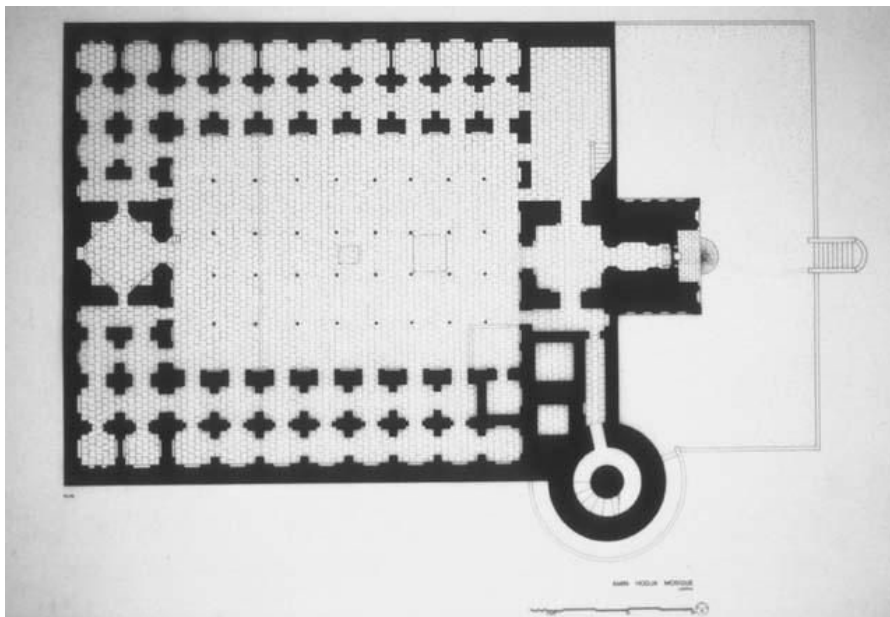


Fig. 19.

Floor plan of the Amin Mosque.
© Don Hanlon (photographer)
Source: Rotch Visual Collections, MIT.

Entrance: Formal *pishtāq*-style portal

Vestibule: A domed space connects the *pishtāq* to the prayer hall

Prayer Hall:

- Roof supported by wooden columns in a hypostyle layout
- Enclosed by a two-bay-deep gallery
- Minimal exterior decoration, in contrast to the richly ornamented minaret

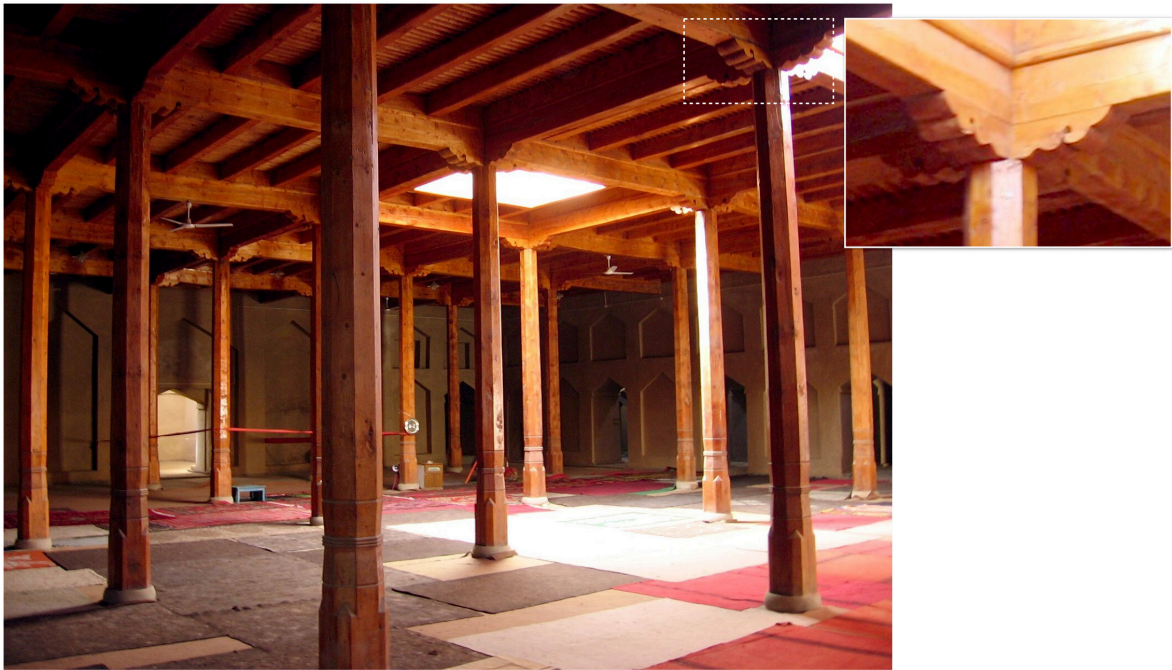


Fig. 20. Renovated prayer hall of the Amin Mosque (in 2006). © Colegota (photographer)
Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), detailed view added by the author.

- Modern interventions: Compare Figure 20, an image of the mosque's prayer hall taken in 2006, and [this photo](#) from Archnet of the same space in 1981. What differences do you notice, particularly in relation to the columns? In the zoomed-in image in Figure 20, why do you think this specific cloud-shaped *dougong*⁸ form was added to the columns during the mosque's recent renovation? Does this alteration affect a visitor's perception of the space? How does it complicate our understanding of preservation and the role of state intervention?

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the Amin Minaret reflect Uyghur religious and cultural identity in Qing China? How does this differ from Hui mosque traditions in the rest of China?
2. What does the architectural similarity between the Amin Minaret and towers in Bukhara and Khiva suggest about transregional knowledge and shared artistic traditions?
3. The Amin Mosque is largely considered an example of Central Asian architectural tradition, but are there aspects of its design that engage with architectural or aesthetic practices from other regions of China?

8. *Dougong* 斗拱 is a traditional Chinese architectural element consisting of a complex system of interlocking wooden brackets placed between the top of a column and the horizontal beams it supports. Both structural and decorative, dougong distributes the weight of the roof while allowing flexibility during earthquakes. Its intricate design is a hallmark of classical Chinese architecture, often symbolizing craftsmanship and imperial aesthetics.

Further Readings

Lipman, Jonathan N. *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China*. University of Washington Press, 1997.

Ross, Lisa, Beth Citron, Rahil Dawut, and Alexandre Papas. *Living Shrines of Uyghur China*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 2013.

Steinhardt, Nancy Shatzman. "Xinjiang: Architecture of Qing China and Uyghur Central Asia." In *China's Early Mosques*, 259–74. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

Suggested Activity:

Modeling Art Historical Research with the Id Gah Mosque in Kashgar, Xinjiang

Despite the historical and artistic significance of Muslim monuments in the Xinjiang region, scholarship on them has largely remained empirical. The lack of a well-established analytical framework allows for open-ended inquiries and, within the classroom context, offers opportunities for instructors to engage students in the practice of art historical research. Instructors may emphasize the relative lack of authoritative scholarship in this area and encourage students to approach the under-explored architectural examples not with the expectation of definitive answers, but as an occasion to apply previously acquired viewing and analytical skills.

The Id Gah Mosque, also known as the Aitika Mosque in Kashgar, presents an example that carries multiple historical layers and architectural idiosyncrasies but also bears familiar elements for which previous exercises analyzing the Amin Mosque will be useful.



Fig. 21.
Entrance of the
Id Gah Mosque
in Kashgar,
Xinjiang.
© N509FZ
(photographer)
Source:
[Wikimedia
Commons](#).

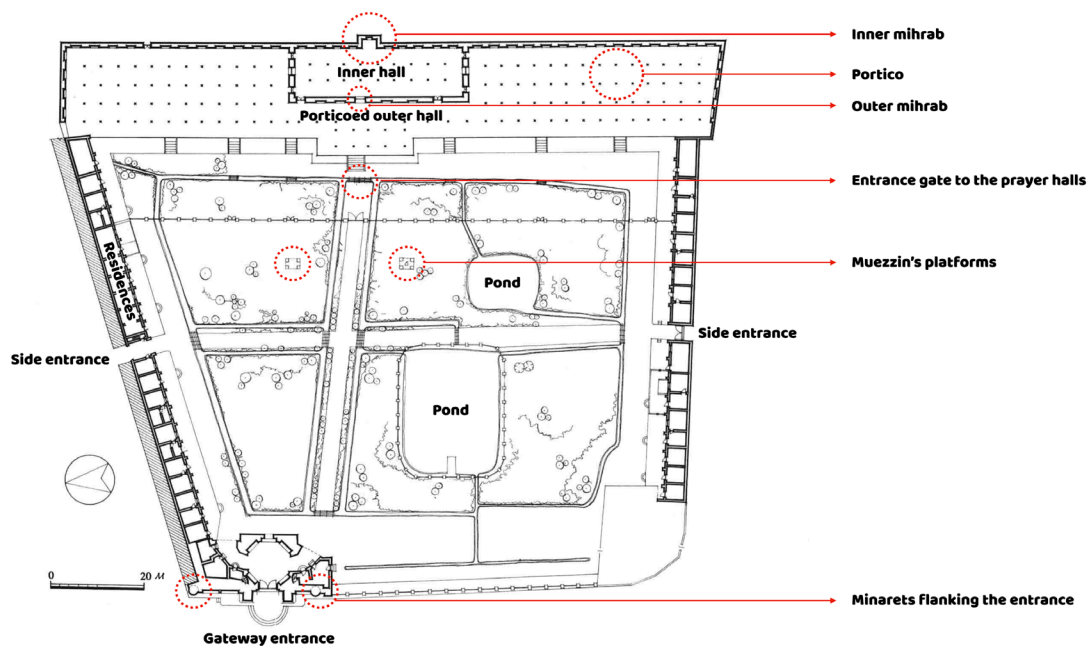
Suggested features for discussion

Fig. 22. Floorplan of the Id Gah Mosque in Kashgar, Xinjiang. © After “Fig.46-1” in Liu Zhiping, *Zhongguo Yisilanjiao Jianzhu* (Beijing, 2011), 145. Annotations by the author.

Click feature names below to see images of the structures:

[Inner mihrab](#)

[Portico](#)

[Outer mihrab](#)

[Entrance gate to the prayer halls](#)

[Muezzin's platform](#)

[Minarets flanking the entrance](#)

- Irregular floorplan and central courtyard. Students are encouraged to identify asymmetrical and irregular features of the mosque, such as the gateway entrance positioned to the left of the façade, the asymmetrically positioned pair of minarets flanking the gateway, and the slanted pathways in the courtyard, which divide it into four unequal sections while leading visitors toward the central point of the prayer hall building. These characteristics may be the result of centuries of expansion, reconstruction, and adaptation, intended to achieve both functional and aesthetic goals. This exercise also provides an opportunity for students to develop visual and spatial connections between a floorplan and its corresponding elevation as represented in photographs and walk-through videos.
- Outer hall with portico and central mihrab. The dual-hall arrangement may also reflect a process of gradual expansion in response to the increasing size of the congregation. It is unusual for mosques in China to feature a mihrab outside the main prayer hall. The

outer mihrab is also notably more ornate than the one located inside the inner hall. This feature could indicate that the mosque regularly accommodates large gatherings, necessitating an outer mihrab for worshippers in the portico or courtyard. The decorative elements surrounding the mihrab arch, as well as the **geometric panel** in the ceiling above it, all promise fruitful close looking exercises.

- Mosaics of artistic traditions. There is no single agreed-upon method for analyzing the mosque's formal features. However, they clearly evoke a variety of artistic traditions familiar to students of Islamic art. Instructors should remind students to move beyond formal comparisons with the central Islamic lands and instead consider the possible localized significance of these elements. Situated at a historical crossroads of peoples and traditions, Xinjiang offers a context in which the mosque can be understood as a site where architectural ideas converged and innovative building practices emerged, rather than one that merely replicated canonical models.

Additional Guidelines for Using the Pedagogy File

The case studies in this pedagogy file address teaching objectives that encompass both Islamic and Chinese themes:

For Islamic courses

It is recommended to introduce the case studies after students have acquired a general understanding of mosque architecture. These sessions may be scheduled near those focused on South Asian and Central Asian mosque traditions so as to enable students to draw meaningful comparisons between mosques in China and those in adjacent regions. Southeast Asian mosques, in particular, offer a rich and effective group of comparanda. Placing these units in close succession can enhance the productivity of discussions around the following questions:

1. What constitutes the “Islamic-ness” and the indigeneity of mosque buildings in China and Southeast Asia?
2. Art historians have long debated the value of tracing an original form. Muslims in China and Southeast Asia—often perceived as residing on the periphery of the Islamic world—are frequently cast as imitators of architectural traditions from the central Islamic lands or producers of derivative, inferior forms. How might an approach that acknowledges and balances both global and local practices shift this historiographical narrative? What role can material culture play in such debates, especially where textual documentation is scarce?

Students should also be made explicitly aware that Indonesia remains the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, and China, despite its Muslim population being relatively understudied, is home to tens of thousands of mosques (as of 2014, official figures reported over 39,000 mosques in China, with the majority located in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.) The characterization of these regions as “peripheral” is

therefore less a reflection of historical reality and more a result of historiographical neglect, which underscores the importance of incorporating these areas into the study of Islamic architecture.

3. Students can be challenged to rethink the center-periphery paradigm altogether: What happens when we stop emphasizing the canonical architectural traditions of the Middle East as the benchmark? How might we reconceive the architectural and cultural exchanges between China and Southeast Asia on their own terms? What would such a transregional approach look like, free from the overarching frame of centrality?

For Chinese courses

It is essential to begin with an introduction to the foundations of mosque architecture. Instructors may choose to present this material through lectures, but students should also be encouraged to explore open-access scholarly resources such as *Khamseen* video essays (e.g., Christiane Gruber’s “Masjid,” Yasemin Gencer’s “Mihrab,” or Mira Xenia Schwerda’s “Minaret”) and *Smarthistory* (e.g., Kendra Weisbin’s “Mosque Architecture, an Introduction”) to build a solid visual and conceptual vocabulary.

As emphasized throughout the case studies, examining the material connections between China and the Islamic world necessarily involves engaging with the Silk Routes not only as historical conduits for the exchange of goods and ideas, but also as evolving geopolitical constructs. To help students contextualize these networks from a contemporary perspective, the following two articles are recommended:

Chin, Tamara T. “The Afro-Asian Silk Road: Chinese Experiments in Postcolonial Premodernity.” *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 136, no. 1 (January 2021): 17–38.

Sen, Tansen. “Inventing the ‘Maritime Silk Road.’” *Modern Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (July 2023): 1059–1104.

Extending the Discussion: Sinicization of Mosques in Contemporary China

After engaging with the case studies above, instructors may choose to deepen the discussion by examining the ongoing campaign to “Sinicize” (i.e., to make Chinese) mosques in China. A useful resource for introducing this topic is the [visual essay](#) published by the *Financial Times*, which offers documentation of architectural transformations taking place under this policy.

Instructors who feel prepared to navigate this sensitive topic are encouraged to invite students to approach the issue from a historian’s perspective. The following questions can help facilitate critical reflection:

1. What are the most visible architectural changes associated with the “Sinicization” campaign?

2. Domes have been removed from prominent mosques in Muslim-majority regions and, in many cases, replaced with tiled hip roofs. Why might this transformation have occurred, and what does it suggest about the relationship between architectural form and religious identity?
3. Reflection on the domes: Do any of the case studies covered above feature domed structures? Why might central, onion-shaped domes have become a default feature in more recent mosque construction in China? Is it valid for the state to argue that domes are not authentic to China's Muslim architecture and replace them with elements reminiscent of a tradition most widely followed in historical China, such as that of the Great Mosque of Xi'an?
4. In studying mosque architecture in China, it is easy to follow area studies frameworks that often led to binary constructs such as "Islamic" and "Chinese." They encourage comparisons that place examples like the Great Mosque of Xi'an, the Ashab Mosque, and the Amin Mosque along a perceived cultural spectrum. How can we critically reflect on and resist the biases that more widely researched or frequently taught cases may impose on our interpretations of less familiar sites? What practices can help us approach such examples on their own terms, rather than through inherited disciplinary hierarchies?
 - a. To support broader analysis of mosque architecture in modern and contemporary contexts, instructors and students may consult: Kishwar Rizvi, *The Transnational Mosque: Architecture and Historical Memory in the Contemporary Middle East* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), and Nebahat Avcioğlu, "The Modern and Contemporary Mosque in Europe, Russia, and Turkey," in *The Religious Architecture of Islam. Volume 2: Africa, Europe, and the Americas*, ed. Hasan-Uddin Khan and Kathryn Blair Moore, 252–73 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022).
 - b. For a China-based case study focused on domed mosques, see Sylvia Wu, "Displaced yet Distinct: Hangzhou's Relocated Congregational Mosque on the Urban Periphery," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 53, no. 1 (2025): 101–30.

These resources and questions are intended to prompt students to critically assess how architectural forms shape, reflect, and contest narratives of religious and cultural belonging in China and beyond.