During the twentieth century a group of Chinese Muslim calligraphers started to produce large calligraphic scrolls in Arabic, displaying and recording religious invocations that would decorate Muslim homes and adorn mihrab niches inside mosques. Such scrolls were very much part of a long-established tradition in China. These decorative hanging panels were produced on rice paper with silk linings, inscribed in the Sui style script characteristic of Chinese Muslims. They were written with brush and ink as in the Chinese scroll tradition, rather than with reed pens as was the case with other calligraphic scrolls from around the Muslim world.

Some of the scrolls display seal impressions in both Chinese characters and Arabic script. The seals are mostly square in shape, and are impressed in red on the left side of the scroll. Some seals are engraved in relief, giving red writing on a white ground when stamped in red ink, and other seals are engraved in intaglio; giving white writing against a red ground. Muslim calligraphers in China had two names: their Chinese name and their Arabic Muslim name. Thus each scroll has at least two seal impressions. Some scrolls have further seals, which have neither a fixed position nor a predetermined shape. They are usually placed on the right side of the scroll to balance and complement the left side, and may contain words in Arabic script giving the name of the calligrapher or religious phrases.
Seals of Chinese Muslim calligraphers

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One of the most well-known calligraphers is Chen Kun, also known as Muhammad Yusuf. Muhammad Yusuf seals his calligraphic scrolls with two square seals both in Chinese characters, one giving his Muslim name and the other his Chinese name. He supplements these seals with another seal in an irregular teardrop shape, which presents his name in Arabic script. Muhammad Yusuf also signs his works in Arabic al-katib Muhammad Yusuf, written next to the square seals. One peculiarity is that Muhammad Yusuf's teardrop seal is in most cases impressed upside-down on the scrolls.

Another Chinese Muslim calligrapher who uses a seal in Arabic script is She Jun You, who signs himself al-katib 'Abd Allah. He seals his scrolls with two square seals, one in Chinese characters with his Chinese name, followed by another in Arabic script with his Muslim name, 'Abd Allah Qasim. He complements these seals with a smaller irregular semicircular seal containing the phrase; 'In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful', in an exceptional blend of Chinese and Arabic aesthetics.
Above Calligraphic scroll by Sho Jun. Yisa in the form of a locust: "Anamta bi Allah sawalalhkathi wa khatubthi wa rasulifi wa al-yunus al-abdir wa al-qadr-biirithi wa-"shaarathi min Allah itda wa al-ba'ira balda al-ma'di, 'I believe in Allah and His Angels, and His Books, and His Prophets and the Divine Decree its good and its bad is pre-destined by Allah and in the Resurrection after Death.' The shahada is its axis: la ilaha ilal Allah Muhammad rasul Allah. 'There is no god except Allah and Muhammad is His messenger.' IAMM 1998.3.13

Top left Seal engraved in relief, Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim, 'In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate.' 32 mm. IAMM 1998.3.38
نور الصحراء
وأنت ل هو النور.

الناس
هم الأسد الهواري.

فما هو
أنت?

أنت
هو النور الصحراء.

فما هو
أنت؟

أنت
هو النور الصحراء.
Islamic' seals of non-Muslims

The central presence of an inscription in Arabic script or its derivatives such as Persian, Turkish or Malay has proved to be such a defining characteristic of seals used by Muslims that it tends to mask the fact that this coherent corpus of 'Islamic' seals also includes seals of Christians in Ethiopia and Syria, Samaritans in Palestine, Hindu subjects of the Mughal emperor and European scholars of Arabic and Persian. This may not have always been the case in some regions, for in the Taj al-Salatin, 'The Crown of Kings', a Malay 'mirror for princes' composed in Aceh in 1603 which draws on older Persian and Arabic sources, non-Muslim subjects of a Muslim ruler are forbidden to wear rings with gemstones or rings engraved in the Islamic manner. ²

In 1615, the Mughal emperor Jahangir (r.1605 - 1627) granted the British the right to trade through the port of Surat in Gujerat. From that time on, officials of the East India Company based in India were theoretically servants of the Mughal emperor. Most business was conducted in Persian, the official language of India at that time, and many British traders and Company officials had seals with their names and titles inscribed in Arabic and Persian, with a pledge of allegiance to the Mughal emperor.

With this precedent, it is not surprising to find that English East India Company officials in Southeast Asia also often used seals with inscriptions in Malay in Arabic script. Francis Light, who founded a British settlement at Penang in 1786, used a Malay seal with his title Kapitan Dewa Raja granted by the Sultan of Kedah, and subsequent British governors of Penang also used seals in Jawi script. In 1811 Thomas Stamford Raffles was based in Melaka as the confidential 'Agent to the Governor General for the Malay States', his secret mission to prepare for the British invasion of Java, then in the hands of Napoleonic forces. In his correspondence with Malay rulers, Raffles used a seal in the name of Lord Minto, Governor-General of Bengal, which was engraved in nasta’liq script, suggesting that the seal had been brought from Calcutta. Lord Minto also had a Persian seal in his capacity as Governor-General, but his proclamation issued on the capture of Batavia in August 1811 bears a large new seal engraved in a Malay hand, which had probably been commissioned by Raffles in Melaka. On the other hand, no Dutch East India Company officials in the Malay world are ever known to have used seals engraved in Arabic script.

² Syarat yang kedua belas tahun berlaku kafir itu memakai cincin yang dengan permata atau cincin yang ada terang palingan seperti terang segala Islam ini. (Khaid 1992: 196).
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Below Seal of Lord Minto, inscribed: Bismillah ‘Ali Khabir Yaqub Daula Hari Raya Kembang Kosong riay pada kebaikan nasib Hindustani atas angin bawang ungu daun’am. This is the seal of His Excellency Maharaja Gilbert Elliot Lord Minto, Governor General of Bengal, ruler of the whole of Hindustan, above the words [and] below the winds (‘989), on a proclamation in Malay announcing the capture of Batavia, signed by T.S. Raffles, 11 August 1811. M. O/G 1811.

Below Silver seal of the East India Company, dated 1808/1796 and inscribed in Persian: ‘The Honorable, the Chief of the Merchants, the English Company, Commander of Finance of the Noble Emir of the provinces of Bengal, Bihur and Orissa, humble servant of Shah ‘Alam, the Emperor and Warrior for the Faith’, and in English To [that effect]. English East India Company, 67mm. (P.254). BM.1971-1-12-1.

Above Album of impressions of Persian seals of British Governor-Generals and Viceroy of India, dating from 1798 to 1860. BM. 1971-1-12-1.
Few Islamic seals of women are known today. Of over six hundred Arabic and Persian seal matrices in the British Museum, only four bear female names, while the 1800 seals documented from the Malay world yield just 17 seals of women. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most surviving seals of women are of royalty, notably of female sovereigns and also of royal consorts and princesses. In the second half of the nineteenth century the Indian kingdom of Bhopal was ruled by a succession of three female rulers, all of whose seals survive.

One of the most unusual uses of a female seal is that of Tengku Ambung, daughter of Sultan Mahmud Musaffar Syah of Riau (r.1835 – 1857), and wife of Raja Muhammad Yusuf, 10th Yang Dipertuan Muda of Riau (r.1858 – 1899). She had two tiny seals, one inscribed Tengku Ambung yang purna and the other Tengku Ambung empunya – both meaning 'Tengku Ambung is the owner' – which were stamped on at least seven large silver vessels from the royal household, now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Due to the seclusion and hence security of female quarters in Islamic courts, royal women also played an important part in the safekeeping of seals. According to Chardin, in Safavid Iran the imperial seal was entrusted to the care of the king’s mother. In Mughal India, one of Akbar’s queens held both the royal signet ring and the great seal of the realm. The great seal of Shah Jahan was held first by his wife Queen Mumtaz Mahal, then by her father Asaf Khan, and later by Shah Jahan’s favourite daughter Princess Jahanara Begam.¹

¹Gallop 1999: 85–6.
Seals of Women

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Below Seal of Sitt Sabarhah, a female merchant from Khurasan. Sitt Sabarhah, Chahyaj Allah al-sagh al-khariz, the estate of Theodosia Litgen at Salag (Phuket). School of Oriental and African Studies, MS 401308/16, f. 217

Above Silver seal of Cut Maq Fatimah, a female religious scholar of Agra. In this alam of Nadir Tsuwaq Husein akor Cut Maq Fatimah 1274, this is the sign presented by Tsuwaq Husein to Cut Maq Fatimah, 1274/1857-8 (2032-6). 47 mm, on a letter from Cut Maq Fatimah and four male nobles to Cut Abdal Rahim of Khurshid Buwa, 27 Jume'idabah 1290 (29 August 1873). Special Collections, University of Amsterdam, Ms 39-50a.