Six Centuries of Islamic Art in China

Enam Abad Kesenian Islam di China

Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia
Muzium Kesenian Islam Malaysia
The introduction of Islam in China occurred as early as the 7th century CE and developed through trade, travel and territorial expansion. In this catalogue is presented a background of the Islamic faith in China, how it arrived and its dissemination throughout time and the different empires of China. To further understand the developing relationship between China and the Islamic lands of Western Asia from an art historical perspective, an essay is featured that discusses the exchanges between East and West Asia and resulting developments in techniques of production, decorative motifs and design. Chinese Islamic ware fused both traditional Chinese and Islamic techniques and decorative styles to create utilitarian objects and objet d’art that became distinctive of Muslim China. Included also is a guide to popular techniques and decorative motifs employed in Chinese Islamic art.

The final section of the catalogue introduces the ten different ethnic Muslim minorities of China, with an outline of their origins and cultural characteristics.

The catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition “Six Centuries of Islamic Art in China”.

With 66 illustrations, 39 in colour and 27 in black and white, and 2 maps.


Katalog ini diterbitkan sempena pameran "Enam Abad Kesenian Islam di China".

Mengandungi 66 ilustrasi, 39 berwarna dan 27 hitam dan putih, dengan 2 peta.

Illuminated medallion from the opening page of a Qing Dynasty Quran, China, 18th century.

Medali berhias dari mukasurat pembukaan Quran Dinasti Qing, China, kurun ke 18.
"Go in quest of knowledge even as far as China"
Saying of the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h (Hadith)
Six Centuries of Islamic Art in China
Note to Reader:
The Pinyin standard is used for the spelling of Chinese names and words. BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) are used in place of BC and AD for dates.

This catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition "Six Centuries of Islamic Art in China", held at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia from 28th July – 28th October 2001.

The exhibition is organised by the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia in collaboration with the Museum of Cultural Palace of Nationalities, Beijing and the North West Minorities University, Lanzhou.

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Art & Tourism Malaysia
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Preface

For the past 3 years, we have been planning to stage an exhibition at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia that would bring to light the beautiful and varied cultures of the Muslims of China. We have been involved in numerous discussions and proposals with cultural institutions in China and these have finally culminated in this groundbreaking exhibition, a collaboration between our museum and the Museum of Cultural Palace of Nationalities of Beijing and the North West Minorities University of Lanzhou. Both these institutions in China are pledged to the cultural preservation of the 55 ethnic minorities of China and they have been as keen as we have to introduce the Malaysian public to the Chinese Muslims and their fascinating heritage.

There are relatively few that are familiar with the fact there are indeed ten distinct ethnic Muslim minorities in China. Scholars have spent little time on this subject and visitors to China rarely stray further than the more typical tourist attractions. To experience these ancient cultures is in some ways a step back in time to the period of the historical Silk Road, located as most of the minorities are in the North West province of Xinjiang, through which the fabled trade route passes. With their ties to Central Asia and other foreign lands, the Chinese Muslims represent a highly diverse portion of Chinese society. As far as we know, the lifestyles and culture of these minorities of China have been given minimum exposure to the rest of the world. With globalisation and the diminishing of cultural boundaries, it is important for us to gain a better understanding of the world around us and it's inhabitants. Through such knowledge, we realise how close the ties of humankind are, transcending geographic boundaries, language barriers and ethnic backgrounds.

It is, thus, indeed a privilege to be able to present this exhibition to the public here in Malaysia, a country with a large population of ethnic Chinese, most of whom are themselves, probably not aware of all the different cultures and ethnic groups from the land of their ancestors.

Established in 620 CE, the religion of Islam has spread to the furthest reaches of the Asian continent through conquest, trade and assimilation. The speed with which Islam grew is astonishing and within the first century of its induction, the empires of Islam covered parts of North Africa and most of the Arabian Peninsula. By this stage, China had already spawned numerous civilisations and dynastic reigns. It was inevitable that a form of exchange would soon occur between the two great empires of Asia, located at opposing ends of the vast continent.

Through trade, travel and territorial expansion, China came to learn of Islam and the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula, Middle East and Central Asia; whilst the land of silk, in turn, became familiar to the people of Western Asia. China never fell under the rule of a Muslim empire. Instead, the Far East was united by many an emperor whose administration directly or indirectly influenced the development of Islam in China. Muslim communities were established that either assimilated with the native population or continued a lifestyle true to
planning to stage an exhibition at the Islamic Arts Museum to highlight the beautiful and varied cultures of the Muslims in numerous discussions and proposals with cultural institutions, finally culminating in a groundbreaking exhibition, at the Museum of Cultural Palaces of Nationalities of Lanzhou University. Both these institutions in China noted the 55 ethnic minorities of China and they have been making the Malaysian public to the Chinese Muslims and familiar with the fact that there are indeed ten distinct ethnic groups with little to offer this subject and visitors to more typical tourist attractions. To experience these up close in time to the period of the historical Silk Road, in the North West province of Xinjiang, through which their ties to Central Asia and other foreign lands, the diverse portion of Chinese society. As far as we know, minorities of China have been given minimum exposure and the diminishing of cultural boundaries, it is a blending of the world around us and it’s inhabitants. The exhibition "Six Centuries of Islamic Art in China" provides the public with visual examples of the different cultural aspects of the Muslims of China and offers a glimpse into the long history of the development of the religion in the Far East. Featuring historical documents and traditional crafts and other items of culture from each minority group, most of the artefacts in the exhibition date from the Qing Dynasty and later periods in China's history, although a small number include Ming Dynasty pieces as early as the 14th century. The vastness of the nation and the intricacies of its social and political history contribute to the difficulty in obtaining material evidence of the history and culture of the minorities, as well as sufficient records on the Islamisation of these people. Nevertheless, it is clear that Islam was and is a strong and prominent presence in their lives. As a supplement to the exhibition, the catalogue acts as a source of further information on Chinese Muslims, their history, art and cultural traditions. The reader is presented with a more detailed background of the Islamic faith in China, how it arrived and its dissemination throughout time and the different empires of China. The exact date or event to mark its introduction, however, is still debatable. For the purpose of this book a compilation has been made of the more significant events that had an impact on the flowering of the religion in the lands of the Far East. To further understand the developing relationship between China and the Islamic lands of Western Asia, an essay is featured that discusses the artistic and cultural exchanges that occurred during this period. This is followed by a brief guide to the techniques and motifs employed in Chinese Islamic art. The ten different Muslim minorities are introduced next with an outline of their origins and cultural characteristics. Finally, we conclude with an epilogue of Muslims in China today.

It is not our intent to either judge or comment on situations of a political nature. Instead, with this catalogue, we hope to stimulate more interest in Chinese Muslims in relation to the fields of history of art and Oriental studies; areas in which they have traditionally been over-shadowed by more prominent empires and civilisations, and encourage more study into their customs, traditions, culture and history.

Our sincere gratitude goes out to several individuals and institutions, without whom, this exhibition and catalogue would not have been possible. Y. B. Datuk Abdul Kadir b. Hj. Sheikh Fadzir, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism, and the Albukhary Foundation for their important contributions. Mr. Tevekool Tiliwal, Director General of the Foreign Affairs Department, State Ethnic Affairs Commission, China, who enthusiastically supported the idea for the exhibition from the beginning. Thank you also to Pn. Syanifah Zainah bt. Syed Salim of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism. Special thanks to Mr. Zhong Xingkui, Director of the Museum of Cultural Palace of Nationalities and Mr. Sha Cunshan and Mr. Ma Qilin of the New World Minorities University, as well as their staff for their efforts in bringing together the artefacts for the exhibition and furnishing us with images and details on the various aspects of the material culture of the minorities. The Islamic Arts Museum Curatorial Department deserves mention for their diligent work in conceptualizing the exhibition and catalogue and turning them into reality. Acknowledgements are also due to various members of staff from the Ministry of Culture, our colleagues in Malaysia as well as China, and all others who have worked together in line with our vision to educate and inspire through the exchange of culture. Finally, we are grateful to Malaysia Airlines for their continued support in helping realize our exhibitions.

SYED MOHAMAD ALBUKHARY
Director, Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia
Map of the Far East and Near East from Chang’an to Damascus, tracing the Silk Route
China is a mysterious and vast land, with a complex history that spans ancient civilisations and magnificent empires. It is a multifaceted nation, the biggest in the Asian continent, whose inhabitants make up over one fifth of the world’s population. Throughout time, China has never been wholly subjected to the rule of a foreign empire. Even the Mongols, who did wrest control from the native Chinese and established the Yuan Dynasty, swiftly adopted Chinese culture and ruled in many respects as a Chinese dynasty. Over the centuries, successive empires expanded to embrace a myriad of cultures and people with their own very distinct languages, customs and beliefs. The material culture of the country is immense and has become instantly recognisable and familiar to the rest of the world. Not as well-known are the individual cultures of the many different ethnic groups that inhabit this extraordinary land. The Muslim community of China consists of ten distinct minorities who have firmly held on to their belief in Allah s.w.t and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h; each maintaining their traditional customs and sustaining a culture that is vibrant and resilient through changing political and cultural climates. According to a 1990 census, at 17,997,400, they made up over 1.5% of China’s total population; however, it is estimated that the accurate figure of Muslims in China is significantly more, as high as 50 million people.

China has a long history of contact with the Arab world, even dating to before the time of the Prophet. Scholars believe that one of the earliest and most significant events to mark the introduction of Islam to the Far East was the arrival of an envoy from the Caliph Uthman in the mid-seventh century at the court of the Tang emperor, Tai Zong. However, contact with the Arab world had been established much earlier, with recorded evidence of the travels to the Middle East by the Han Dynasty General Zhang Qian in the second century BCE.
Chinese History and the Development of Islam

In the third century BCE, the Chinese emperor Shi Huangdi of the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BCE) ordered the building of the Great Wall in an attempt to unify China and protect the land from aggressive enemy attacks. By the time of the Western Han (206 BCE - 8 CE), the struggle against the Xiongnu or Huns still raged on leading the Emperor Wudi to send the General Zhang Qian in search of the Yuezhi people whom the Han believed to be sympathetic to their cause and who would assist them in the resistance against the Huns. Thus, in 138 BCE, Zhang Qian embarked on a journey which was to take him thirteen years to complete. From Chang'an, the capital, he travelled westwards, returning with detailed accounts of the lands and people he had encountered, the Fergana valley, Samarqand, Bukhara and more. Contact had been established, and political envoys were officially dispatched, whilst trade and exploration grew along what came to be known as the Silk Road. This marked the beginning of the many exchanges that were to occur throughout Chinese history between the empires and the different ethnic groups along the route.

The famous Silk Road, coined in the 1870’s by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, is possibly the greatest land trade route known to man. From Chang’an, across the sands of the Taklamakan desert and through the foothills of the Tian Shan pass, through the major trade centres of Bukhara and Samarqand in modern-day Uzbekistan, to as far as Antioch and Damascus in Syria and beyond to Cairo. Caravans laden with silk, spices, precious stones and metals, ivory, glass, perfumes and incense, moved to and fro; traders braving the most intense of environments in the name of commerce and travellers with an insatiable wanderlust exploring lands hitherto unknown to them.

The Silk Road was at its most important during the time of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), one of the greatest of China’s empires which achieved a period of unsurpassed brilliance in the development of art and culture. Besides official envoys and missionaries, merchants and traders from around the world—many of them Arabs—gathered in the capital of Chang’an. According to a census recorded in 754 CE, five thousand foreigners resided in the city apart from its local inhabitants; counted amongst these were Turks, Persians, Indians, Japanese, Koreans and Malays. Imperial expansions during this period added to the foreign presence with the inclusion of prisoners of war and slaves, mostly from Central Asia.
inese emperor Shi Huangdi of the Qin Dynasty (221-154 B.C.E.) began the Great Wall in an attempt to unify China and protect the empire from enemy attacks. By the time of the Western Han (206 B.C.E. to 25 B.C.E.), the Xiongnu or Huns still roamed the grasslands in search of the Yuezhi people whom they had fought for centuries. Zhang Qian embarked on a journey to the west in 138 B.C.E. to seek an alliance with the Yuezhi. This marked the beginning of official trade and cultural exchange between China and Central Asia.

In the 1870s, the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen identified the route known as the Silk Road, which connected China with countries such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and more. This contact was official and peaceful, as the trip was not intended as a military campaign. After his return, he wrote extensively about the cultures and civilizations he had encountered.

The introduction of Islam in the Tang court during the reign of the second emperor, Tai Zong (r. 627-649), is described in a legend about a Muslim community in China. The emperor is said to have had a dream of a turbaned man with dark features who magically vanished some monsters. According to the legend, the emperor was informed of his dream by court interpreters, who informed him of the presence of Muslims in the region. An envoy was dispatched to Arabia to meet with three emissaries from the Prophet, including Sa’d Ibn Abu Waqqas, who had been the imperial uncle to the Prophet as well as one of his companions. Tang annals officially state the year 651 as the first date of Islam’s arrival in China. The year 651 also marks the start of a new era in the history of Chinese-Mongol relations.

Further records state that in the same year Chinese assistance was sought by a Persian Sassanian prince, Peroz, against the Arabs who were expanding their territories in the Middle East. Help was in fact provided, but eventually, a peaceful relationship between the Chinese empire and the Middle East came to develop through trade. Tang annals describe the Muslim presence at the Tang court. Arab historians report military campaigns in the East at the beginning of the eighth century. The year 751 saw an encounter between Muslim and Chinese armies at the Battle of Talas, an event that was to prove unexpectedly fruitful as will be discussed in the following chapter. The animosity between the two great empires during this time was short-lived, however. In 755, the Emperor Xuanzong appealed for military assistance from Abu Ja’far al-Mansur, the second Abbasid Caliph, to quell an uprising led by the General An Lushan (the An Shi rebellion). The emperor was successful thanks to the aid provided by Turkic Uighurs and 4,000 troops sent by the Caliph.

The next major factor in the spread of Islam in China occurred during the time of the Mongols. In the thirteenth century, the Mongol hordes swept into China and Central Asia, conquering vast stretches of territory and devastating entire cities and towns. In 1279, the Yuan Dynasty was founded by Qubilai Khan, grandson of Chingiz Khan, with its capital at Khanbalik, now Beijing. Despite the atrocities committed and the ruthless destruction the Mongols caused, open trade was encouraged under Yuan rule and the time was one of religious tolerance. The Mongols were directly responsible for an increase in the non-ethnic Chinese population of China. The Turkic peoples of Central Asia were appointed under the Yuan Dynasty as border guards, tax collectors and administrators, as to the Mongols, the surnames (coloured eyes) were held in higher esteem compared to the Han Chinese and the Southern non-ethnic Chinese minorities whom they had conquered.

The Mongol rule began to wane towards the end of the thirteenth century, eventually collapsing and being replaced in 1368 by the Ming Dynasty. Trade during the Ming Empire became increasingly controlled, though foreign envoys and traders continued to arrive in the court, particularly via sea-routes. It was at this time, however, that a true Muslim settlement first became established in China. The multi-ethnic communities encouraged by the Mongols continued to exist under Ming rule and Islam, along with other religions, was tolerated and was even able to expand. The first Ming capital, Nanjing, became a centre of Islamic learning and culture and numerous mosques were built under the order of the Ming Emperor. Muslim officers occupied high-ranking positions in the Ming imperial army and Muslim troops who were assigned to garrison towns in the North-West region of the country eventually settled down and intermarried with the local population, thus creating the first Muslim communities in the Gansu and Ningxia provinces.

The Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) succeeded the Ming Dynasty and it was during this period that tensions developed between the Muslim minorities and the empire. Muslim uprisings occurred in both the North-West and South-West regions of China. In 1656, a regime was set up in Yunnan by the Muslim Hui in resistance against the Qing government, whilst rebellions raged on in the North-West region from 1862-1877.
The Qing Dynasty succeeded in tightening the hold over the Northwest and predominately Muslim region of China. The establishment of a modern China in the 20th century further cemented this union. As time went on, the Muslim minorities as well as other minorities groups were increasingly effected by restrictions on religious and cultural practices. The establishment of socialism and the laws enforced by Mao and his Red Guard spelled further trials for the minorities. In recent times, however, more liberal policies have been enforced that help to ease the regulations and allow greater freedom for the development of multiculturalism.

Notes:

1. Zhang Qian's journey took such a long period to complete owing to his capture by the Huns. After 10 years, he was able to escape and continue his journey, only to be captured again on his return, before finally managing to return to Chang'an.

2. The name Chang'an translates to Everlasting Peace. Today known as Xi'an or Western Peace, it was renamed in 1368 under Ming rule and no longer served as the capital.

3. The Persian Sassanian Empire had been struggling to resist the Islamic encroachment in the Middle East. The prince Peroz, son of Yazdiljird III, was amongst the last members of the empire to hold out against the Arabs. Despite some assistance from the Chinese, Sassanian rule came to an end, marking the beginning of Persia's history as an Islamic state.

4. The Abbasids were commonly known as the 'black robed ones' in both China and Byzantium, due to their preference for black robes worn as a mark of defiance against the Umayyads whose traditional garb had been white.
Man's desire to own luxury commodities has always been a stimulus for cultural exchange. The appeal of the exotic has long encouraged commercial exchange and through trade people have yielded to new and alien artistic influences. Commercial and cultural exchanges between China and the Islamic West had long been active through both the legendary Silk Route and maritime trade routes. Most dramatically, in the thirteenth century, direct contact between East and West was opened by the Mongols. From that time on, Chinese influence became one of the main distinctive features in Islamic arts.

Already by the eighth century, the Chinese emperor was recognised by the Umayyad Caliph to be among the world's great rulers. He appears on a wall painting at Qasayr Amra, (Jordan), among other world rulers including the Byzantine emperor, the great King Khusraw of Iran, the Negus of Abyssinia and Roderick, King of the Visigoths.

During the Abbasid period (750-1258), Chinese exports such as silk, ceramics, and silverware were brought into the Islamicate. These products were always greatly admired and had a major impact. It is said that the governor of Khorasan, al-Baihaqi, reported the superior quality of Chinese ceramics to the Caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809) with 2000 pieces of Chinese porcelain.

‘20 pieces of Chinese imperial porcelains the like of which had never been seen at Caliph's court before’. (Hillenbrand, R, *Islamic art and Architecture*, London 1999.)

Their impact saw enthusiasm for the import of Chinese wares increase and there was great demand on local potters to fill the resulting deficiency in their supply. This led to an explosion in ceramic production in the ninth century. Despite the efforts of Islamic potters to equal the quality of the Chinese ceramics, their inferior raw material hindered success. However, the challenge to Islamic potters brought great innovation to their production techniques. The Chinese motif, Yin and Yang, appeared at the Abbasids' second capital, Samarra, though its impact was not comparable to that of chinoiserie (Chinese inspired motifs) on later Islamic art.

Not only peaceful exchanges but also warfare contributed to the spread of art and culture. In 751, the Abbasid army met the Chinese Tang army at Talas (in the modern republic of Kazakhstan, near the Kirghiz border). The Muslim army (mainly Turkish *mamluks*) triumphed and Caliphal authority expanded into Central Asia. Many skilled Chinese craftsmen, captured by the Arab army, were settled in Persia and Mesopotamia. For example, captured paper makers established a paper making industry in Samargand. As a result, the technique of papermaking soon reached Baghdad and hence, from the Islamic lands, spread to Europe. At the same time, the
Chinese master silk weavers, Yue Huan and Lu Li, were taken to Iraq where they taught Chinese silk weaving techniques to local weavers. Though this conflict interrupted overland exchanges between China and the Islamicate, it encouraged maritime trading which eventually became the main commercial conduit.

The fashion in Chinese motifs was greatly encouraged with the arrival in the West of the Mongols. The Mongols, though often decried as destroyers actually revived cultural activities and oversaw the development of unique styles. The Mongols moved westward in 1217. They captured Baghdad and put the Abbasid Caliph to death in 1258. Genghis Khan's grandson, Hulegu, established the Il-Khanid dynasty (1258-1353), his power-base in Iran, as a subordinate dynasty to the Yuan of China (1271-1368), creating a *Pax Mongolica* and a direct physical link between China and the Islamic world.

The late thirteenth century proved pivotal in the history of Islamic Art. Some tiles from Takht-i Suleyman in Azerbaijan, Abaq Khan's (r.1265-82) summer palace, were decorated with such Chinese motifs as dragons, phoenixes, lotuses, cherry blossoms, peonies, lobed or cusped framing and even slanted-eyed Orientals. The dragon and phoenix were used as symbolic figures for the Chinese emperor and empress. Abaq's brother and successor, Ahmad Tegudar (r.1282-4) converted to Islam. However, the Il-Khanid remained as a subordinate khanate to Yuan China until the beginning of the fourteenth century when Ghazan (r.1295-1304) and his predominantly Mongol court converted to Islam.

Chinese silk trading along the Silk Road had already flourished in the Han period (206 BCE - 220CE). Thereafter, Chinese motifs became known through textile trading. In particular, during the Tang period, motifs related to Buddhism were absorbed into China through Central Asia. Also, Sassanian Persian motifs became absorbed into China as Tang idioms. During the Song period, mixtures of naturalistic flowers and miniature animals, lions, phoenixes and butterflies, sometimes in tortoiseshell cells, became popular. These traditional
Chinese influence on Islamic art reached its peak during the reign of the Timurids (1370-1507), another Central Asian dynasty with Mongol ancestry. Deeply carved Chinese motifs on lacquer, marble, stone, wood, stucco and tile became very popular. The technique is thought to have been inspired by Chinese objects such as lacquer and bronze mirrors. The uniqueness of Timurid motifs is their mixture of the Islamic arabesque and Chinese chinoiserie, referred to as the Timurid International style. The deep carving technique gave objects a fluid and three-dimensional effect and their decoration a naturalistic quality. This Timurid International Style became the major source of later Islamic decorations.

The Chinese inspired not only the technical innovations of Islamic potters but also the Islamic decorations on their ceramics. Since the fourteenth century, vast quantities of Chinese export wares were brought to the Islamic West. ‘Blue and white’ (qinghua in Chinese, literally translates as ‘blue flowers’) ware in particular circulated throughout the Islamic lands. It is said that painting with cobalt blue was introduced to China through Muslims from the village of Qamsar near Kashan. Using cobalt on ceramics as a decorative element has been seen in western Asia for centuries. The large dishes and jars which began to appear in China reflected the eating habits of the Islamic world.

The imbalance between supply and demand for blue and white ware required local potters to fill the gap. This caused an overproduction of blue and white imitations in the Islamicate. Shah Abbas (r. 1587-1629) kept 1,162 pieces of Chinese porcelain in the Ardebil Shrine near the Caspian Sea. When he restored the shrine, he set up a building for the porcelain that was named Chini Khana (Porcelain House). The Ottoman sultans also stored 10,358 pieces of Chinese ceramics from the Yuan through the Qing dynasties in the Topkapi Palace. This high demand for blue and white ware obviously effected designs for the Chinese export market. By the sixteenth century, Chinese blue and white was appearing in Islamic forms decorated with Quranic verses and Persian poems. Also, items such as pen boxes, incense globes, and brush rests that were for domestic
consumption and not for export to the Islamicate appeared in China. This would appear to indicate the presence of a large Muslim community within China itself.

In the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) during Yongle’s reign (r. 1403-1424), ceramics based on Islamic metalwork appeared. The sources for these octagonal candlesticks and two-handled flasks were possibly Islamic metal flasks from Jazira (the upper Euphrates) and Syria. At that time there were three possible avenues through which they might have travelled. Missions were exchanged between Yongle’s Ming court and Shah Rukh’s Timurid court. Muslims returning from the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca might have taken these metalworks back with them to China. The great expedition commanded by the Muslim Zheng He (1371-1433) was deeply involved in tribute trading and he facilitated the absorption of Islamic influence in China.

During the reign of Zhengde (r. 1506-21), many blue and white ware in Arabic shapes and with Arabic inscriptions were produced. However, the Arabic inscriptions tended to be poorly written and the cobalt appeared grey. The Emperor himself was interested in Islam. He sometimes dressed in Arab costumes and prohibited the consumption of pork. During the reign of Jiajing (r. 1522-66), fine quality thick blue cobalt often called Muhammadan Blue (huì-huí qìng) was used. In the early Ming period high quality Persian cobalt was mined in Persia and shipped to Quanzhou after civil war had interrupted the cobalt trade.

Chinese influence on ceramics developed differently in Safavid Persia (1501-1736) and Ottoman Turkey (1299-1922). Safavid Potters imitated Chinese motifs found mainly in the Timurid International style rather than from Chinese originals. Therefore the tessellated hexagon motif in particular had a closer resemblance to the geometric Islamic patterns rather than to the Chinese original. Non-Chinese utensils such as the hookah (water pipe) had Chinese decorations. Ottoman potters adapted chinoiserie from Chinese blue and whites, though not from contemporary wares but from earlier pieces, fourteenth and fifteenth century. Potters developed their own style by combining chinoiserie (hatay in Turkish) and arabesque (numi in Turkish), with the addition of various colours.

Not only ceramics but also Ottoman textile production showed Chinese influence. For example, the Chinese motif of Buddhist origin, chintamani, consisting of repetitive sets of three balls arranged in pyramid shapes, became a very popular motif on textiles and ceramics. However, as with many similar examples, the original meaning had been lost and the shapes changed.

4. Detail of a blue and white underglaze painted earthenware dish, China, date unknown. The central compartment is adorned with a pair of dragons flaming a flaming pearl, followed by an encircling band of celestial horses. The cavetto bears alternating roundels containing calligraphy and Dervish dancers.
Chinese Islamic Decorative Techniques

CERAMICS

Islamic Chinese ceramics flourished under the patronage of Ming emperors such as Yongle (r. 1403-1424) and reached its height of production during the reign of emperor Zhengde (r. 1506-1521). The shape and form of Chinese Islamic ware is often characteristically Chinese, with Quranic verses in Arabic script and traditional Chinese motifs, such as the peony, lotus blossom and cloud scroll motifs. The pieces created during the Ming and Qing Dynasties often bear the imperial reign marks of the period.

Sancai ware

Sancai or tri-coloured ware reached its height of popularity during the Tang dynasty. Generally, Chinese Muslim potters practised this technique of decoration for utilitarian ware. Buff-coloured earthenware vessels were coated with clear lead silicate glazes and were tinted in green, amber-yellow and brown (or occasionally dark blue) with iron, copper and manganese oxides, often kept from intermingling by the application of fine threads of clay. This method of decoration was widely adopted by the rest of the Islamic world though the control of these volatile glazes was never perfected with the same skill as that of the Chinese Muslims. This variation, known as splash-decorated ware, continued to retain its popularity within the Islamic world for its freedom and fluidity of design.

Blue & white ware

Through the re-establishment and expansion of trade during the Ming dynasty, cobalt oxide was brought into China via Iran. It is believed to have been imported to China where Muslim potters ground it from its cake-like form into a pigment suitable for painting directly onto the porcelain body of the vessels before glazing and firing. The rich soft blue against a creamy white ground was much admired for its elegance and refined technicality that it was soon highly sought after, with the rarity and cost of cobalt simply serving to increase the demand and prestige of such wares. An indigenous form of cobalt ore was available, though the Chinese cobalt yielded a less pleasing hue of grey-blue owing to its high level of manganese. However, potters soon found that by mixing three parts of the imported cobalt to two parts of the local Chinese ore, it produced a soft shade, which earned the name Muhammadan Blue.
Blanc de Chine ware

The characteristic product of Te-hua in the Fujian Province is the white porcelain known to the French as blanc de chine, often likened to blancmange or milk jelly. The earliest wares have been attributed to the Ming kilns though the most enduring examples today were produced during the reign of the Qing dynasty. Generally these vessels were not overglaze decorated, as they were valued for their creamy, lustrous ivory-toned glaze. Chinese Muslim blanc de chine wares were often adorned with moulded relief decoration of lotus blossoms, plum blossoms, peonies and calligraphic cartouches.

Enamelled ware

The most striking feature of Chinese enamelled ceramics is the wide palette range, the brilliance of the enamels and the rich textural effect of these wares. They were prized for their warm cheerful colours, and skilled control. Enamel consists of silica, soda or potash and lead that melts and fuses to create a glass-like substance when fired at high temperatures. The brilliance of enamel depends on the perfect combination of its components and on maintaining an equal temperature throughout its fusion in the crucible. Chinese Muslim enamel work was most commonly applied to porcelain vessels using traditional Chinese motifs, which lent itself well to the extensive range of colours.

Calligraphy and Illumination

Chinese Muslim calligraphy emphasises the integration of culture and religion between China and the rest of the Islamic world. When considering the reverence with which both China and the Islamic world regarded the scholarly tradition and the importance of calligraphy in the communicative and decorative arts, it seems a natural progression that the Chinese Muslims would derive an Islamic script suitable to the aesthetic ideals of the Chinese. Islamic Chinese calligraphy is believed to have originated along the port cities in South China, such as Fuzhou, Quanzhou and Hangzhou, brought in by Arab traders as early as the seventh century.

The calligraphy of Chinese Qurans is immediately noted for its elegance in style, fluidity and balanced proportion. It is possible that the Chinese Islamic script is a derivative of Naskh and Thuluth, interpreted and influenced by the traditional Chinese style of calligraphy, eventually evolving into its own distinct script. Chinese calligraphers additionally felt that the Arabic script did not lend itself well to the shapes and designs they envisioned; thus developed a highly abstract form of calligraphy greatly influenced by the Chinese aesthetic, which allowed the creation of pictorial images composed from religious verses. The result is a range of work, almost entirely
**Illumination and Calligraphy**

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calligraphic, of Islamic verses written, for example, in the shape of a fan or flowers or auspicious Chinese symbols.

Illumination is most frequently executed in the Quran as it is considered the holiest book, requiring lavish ornamentation. Chinese Muslim illuminators adhere strictly to the doctrine of Islam and thus the designs used in the decoration of the Quran are based on vegetal, geometric and cloud scroll motifs, often embellished with gouache and gold pigment paints. A Quran is composed of 30 juz and in China, divided into 30 individual booklets, unlike the Qurans in most other regions of the Islamic world that are usually compiled into one tome. The task of decorating the booklets often required a group of illuminators and it is common to find a lack of standardisation in illuminatory styles and motifs.

**Textiles**

Many of the traditional costumes of the Chinese Muslims are not worn today though the modern variations still retain their original shape and concept. Aside from the doctrine of Islam, the design of Chinese Muslim costumes were often dictated by the lifestyle of the individual minorities, their customs and practices, artistic ideals, geography and the climate in which they dwelt. The common factors to be found in the design of Chinese Muslim ethnic costumes are their traditionally conservative and attractive yet practical form.

**Embroidery**

Embroidery is a technique of textile decoration through the application of a variety of stitches. The types of threads most commonly used were silk, wool and cotton, occasionally further embellished with fine gilt thread. Some of the earliest examples of embroidered textiles are dated to the Five Dynasties period, in the tenth century at Su-chou in the Jiangsu province, where a set of embroidered book covers were unearthed. However, embroidery is believed to extend back to the Han dynasty in the third century and has been a technique of textile decoration frequently employed by all the Chinese Muslim nationalities.
Appliqué

Appliqué refers to a technique in which decorative fabric panels are stitched onto a textile ground. Most often, the applied panels are cut in geometrically stylised floral and foliate motifs from wool, felt, leather, silk and cotton. This technique was commonly used in the embellishment of boots, tent panels, hangings and clothes, widespread amongst the Kirghiz, Kazakh, Uzbek and Tajik nationalities.

Ikat Dyeing

Popular amongst the Central Asian Chinese Muslim nationalities, this technique involved hand-dyeing warp threads, usually silk, by carefully wrapping selected sections to protect them from the dye baths. This process was repeated until the threads were dyed in multi-colours, which were then woven into a silk cloth known as adilesi, traditionally made into robes worn by the Uyghur and Uzbek minorities.

Weaving

Weaving was and still is an art essential to the lifestyle of the pastoral Chinese Muslims. Wool, as the most favoured and accessible material, was processed into utilitarian items such as tent hangings, covers, roofs, screens, carpets, blankets, bags and ropes for daily use. These items served a functional purpose as well as providing a form of artistic expression, vividly coloured and adorned in relatively simple geometric patterns with occasional lapses in symmetry. The Kazakhs and the Kirghiz were noted in particular for their reed screens individually wrapped and interwoven with coloured wool.
**Metalwork**

The Chinese Muslim nationalities are largely semi-nomadic and agricultural based people. For their particular lifestyle, a natural preference developed for items that were durable and stable. Metal-based pieces were extremely popular for possessing these qualities and for the wide variety of techniques employed in its decoration.

**Repoussé**

The name repoussé originates from the French pousser—to push forward—a method of decorating sheet metal vessels in which the decoration is raised in relief from the back or the inside of the article by means of hammers and punches. Definition and detail is then added from the front by chasing or engraving.

**Engraving and Chasing**

Engraving is a technique of metalwork ornamentation to define or refine surface decoration. The metal is worked from the front or the exterior of the vessel with the use of various tools to raise, depress or render lines and angles. Chasing is carried out from the back of the vessel to create a higher and more pronounced relief ornamentation.

**Inlay**

The technique of inlay is a process of metalwork embellishment that involves setting strips or sections of a different metal into a shallow or depressed surface to create a luxurious contrast. Often this involved the application of a precious metal onto the surface of a less precious one. The most common technique of inlay was to set gold or silver into brass or bronze vessels.

**Cloisonné**

The earliest example of Chinese cloisonné is believed to date from the Tang dynasty, found on a silver mirror in Nara, Japan.

It is believed that no other known examples of Chinese cloisonné enamelled ware existed until the late Yuan dynasty in the fourteenth century. However archaeological findings have suggested that a variation of the cloisonné technique was practised as early as the 6th century BCE. Cloisonné, meaning partitions in French is a process that involves outlining a design with wire strips on the vessel surface and filling the compartments with pulverised enamel. The height of cloisonné production occurred during the Ming dynasty; characterised by its bold designs and striking palette of deep cobalt blue, bright turquoise, coral red, rich yellow, green, black and white. The most popular form of Chinese Muslim cloisonné work may be found on incense burners and vases, adorned with Quranic calligraphic verses and floral tendril motifs.

**Bronze casting**

Bronze is defined as an alloy of copper and tin with minimal traces or no zinc. Owing to its brittle and heavier nature as compared to brass, bronze was mainly used for casting. The most popular cast bronze vessels amongst the Chinese Muslims came in the form of tri-legged basin incense burners and drop-shaped vases with elongated necks; adorned with simple yet elegant calligraphic cartouches.

9. Tri-legged Incense Burner with Arabic calligraphic inscriptions, Gansu, 1426 - 1435 CE.
Chinese Islamic Decorative Motifs

The Chinese Muslims recognise the importance of non-figural depiction within a religious context. However outside the boundaries of religious text, the Chinese Muslims incorporate a wide variety of decorative motifs popular in traditional Chinese art, drawn from sources rooted in legendary, philosophical, historical and religious traditions of the Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian stream. Chinese symbolism differs from that of most other cultures, in the belief that, firstly, each individual component of an overall design bears its own auspicious significance; and secondly, that a mystical connection lies in the similarity between the word designated as an object name and the word describing a desirable quality. These words which to a non-Chinese speaker appear identical in spelling are differentiated by tonal inflections in their pronunciation. These symbols have remained etched in Chinese consciousness as omens of good fortune and well wishes to the recipient, used by the Non-Muslim Chinese and the Chinese Muslims alike.

Within the Chinese Muslim context these motifs appear in variations, with notable influences from the Islamic world. Arabesque-inspired foliate tendrils as well as variations of the star and crescent, paisley leaves, dervish dancers and cusped medallions reminiscent of Islamic architectural domes and arches may often be found on many Chinese Islamic artefacts. Similarly as the Chinese Muslims adopted aspects of Islamic motifs, so too did the elements of chinoiserie, motifs of Chinese inspiration, pervade the art of the Islamic world.

10. Incense Burner, Gansu, 1426 - 1435 CE. A cylindrical tri-legged incense burner with a cast ornament of a male Fu dog playing with a ball. The body of the vessel is adorned with a cusped calligraphic cartouche inscribed: “God is great. There is no god but Allah.”
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Cloud scrolls & calligraphic scrolls

The cloud scroll is alternately believed to be a
stylisation of the floating juven, a sceptre
used by the highest heavenly deity or a
variation of geometric thunder bolt s frets. Calligraphic scrolls
are associated with knowledge and when depicted bound with
cloud scroll bands, they are symbolic of spiritual learning and
enlightenment.

Fret patterns

Fret patterns consist of a band of geometric,
angular designs considered a symbol of the
thunder bolt, associated with happiness. It
is also believed to be a stylisation of the Buddhist swastika,
representation of the sun (the swastika derives its name from
two ancient Sanskrit words meaning well-being and good
fortune).

Rocks & mountains

Depicted in almost every landscape setting,
rocks and mountains are associated with
eternity, stability, loyalty and endurance. The mountain and sea
are often depicted together and when combined represent long
life and good fortune respectively.

Phoenixes

The phoenix is a composite of the spiritual
and the physical; traced back to the Shang
dynasty (1600-1100 BCE) when it was used as a clan emblem.
It came to be associated with the empress and embodies the
qualities of refinement, elegance, beauty and happiness. When
represented beside the dragon, the feminine phoenix
compliments the masculine dragon (the balance of the yin and
yang).

Dragons

An emblem of the emperor and a symbol of
masculinity, nobility, valour, strength and
protection. According to ancient myths, Yu
the original ancestor of the Chinese, sprang forth in the shape
of a yellow dragon from his father’s body upon his death.
Chinese legends describe the evolution of the dragon,
originating as a water snake which changes after 500 years into
a serpent-dragon. After 1000 years it changes into a dragon
with scales which after another 500 years becomes a horned
dragon. The final stage of evolution occurs 1000 years later
when it turns into a winged-dragon.

Celestial horses

Horses are closely associated with the
military and the nobility, embodying all
the virtues to represent wealth, prestige
and mobility. White horses are
legendarily linked with the carrying of Buddhism to India and
are thus symbolic of the spread of knowledge. Often these
horses are depicted in flight or running so swiftly that their feet
do not touch the ground.

Fu dogs

Also known as shih-shih, lion dogs or dogs
of Buddha. Believed to be the endorsement
of the law, these mythological creatures are
of Buddhist origin and were originally
deemed the guardians of the temples. Fu dogs are nearly
always depicted in male & female pairs and represent qualities
of steadfastness and loyalty. There have been many variations
sometimes snarling, with flared nostrils, flaming manes and
feet.
Peonies

Dubbed ‘the Queen of flowers’ for its rich colour and sweet scent, the peony is symbolic of spring as well as love and feminine beauty. It also represents honour and happiness. The peony, when depicted with the plum blossom, lotus and chrysanthemum is symbolic of the four seasons and eternal cycles.

Plum blossoms

Owing to the great age to which the trees survive, plum blossoms are considered a symbol of longevity.

Lotuses

The lotus signifies purity. It embodies the spirit of the incorruptible, growing with strong, deep roots and beautiful blossoms from the murky depths of marshland waters. The lotus goes by two names in the Chinese language, one is a homonym of ‘peace and harmony’, and the other meaning ‘repeated good fortune’.

Chrysanthemums

Chrysanthemums are traditionally associated with autumn, when it is at its height of bloom and all other flowers have withered. It metaphorically creates the imagery of a peaceful and long life for its unyielding ability to withstand the chill of the on-coming winter.

Pomegranates

The image of the pomegranate is believed to have come from Central Asia with the spread of Buddhism before the last century BCE. The pomegranate is often depicted with palm leaves and lotuses as a symbol of holiness. As the pomegranate contains many seeds, it is an implication of fertility and a good harvest.

Bamboo

As an evergreen plant, the elegant slender bamboo represents the qualities of strength, endurance, flexibility and resilience to survive any weather. The bamboo is connected with good fortune as its name is similar to the word ‘wish’.

Crested pheasants

These are most commonly depicted in pairs and sometimes alternated with paired mandarin ducks. These are symbolic of beauty and blessed marital pairing.

Cranes

Cranes represent beauty, elegance and longevity. Another popular symbol of longevity is the peach. The crane is according to Chinese legend, the bird that carries the immortals to heaven. This symbol was adopted by the high officials of the Chinese court.
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Butterflies
Often associated with ancestral spirits and remembrance. As the sound of 'butterfly' is similar to the word 'octogenarian', it is also considered a symbol of longevity.

Bats
Owing to the similarity in pronunciation of the words 'happiness' and 'wealth', the image of the bat has become an auspicious symbol. Occasionally depicted in a group of five carrying a coin, these are considered the 'five blessings' of longevity: wealth, health and peace, the love of virtue and a natural death.

Carp
Carp are the most popular fish depicted in Chinese motifs owing to the word carp's homophonic similarity to the words 'profit' and 'benefit'. They are symbolic of longevity as they are believed to be immune to deaths by natural causes. Carp are also associated with the quality of perseverance as according to myth, carp that swim through the Dragon's Gate rapids at Longmen will metamorphose into dragons.

Talismanic squares
A motif mainly used for Chinese Islamic export ware, talismanic or Magic Squares are grids containing Arabic numerals and were believed to protect the user against ill fortune.
8 Buddhist emblems

These emblems, though rooted in Buddhist iconography, are associated with auspicious significance to the Chinese and hence may often be found in Chinese Muslim art.

Wheel: The wheel of life, symbolises eternity, destiny and the cycles of birth and death.
Conch shell: The sounds from the conch shell are believed to be as soothing as the voice of Buddha.
Paired fish: The words ‘fish’ and ‘abundance’ share the same sound in the Chinese language and are hence associated with the abundance of good wishes. Paired fish symbolise good fortune doubled or a happy marital union.
Endless knots: The crafting of endless knot designs with coloured silk ribbons is a traditional form of Chinese art. Each knot technique has its own auspicious name and is symbolic of eternity.
Lotus: The lotus blossom has its origins in Buddhism, with Buddha often depicted seated on a lotus throne.
Vase: The vase is an emblem signifying knowledge and achievement.
Canopy: The canopy is believed to be a symbol of Buddha’s protection against ill fortune.
Umbrella: Similar to the canopy, the umbrella is symbolic of protection.
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Clockwise from top left:

11. Overglaze enameled porcelain dish, China, 19th – 20th century. The outer rim of the dish is adorned with a motif of birds and floral sprays within fret patterned compartments. The central section is adorned with a chain of bats and calligraphic roundels encircling a composition of butterflies, chrysanthemums and peaches.

12. Overglaze enameled porcelain dish, China, 19th – 20th century. A large bowl, ornately enameled with motifs of chrysanthemums, peonies, plum blossoms and lotus, bamboo, crested pheasants, phoenixes, butterflies, roosters, an owl, peacocks, sparrows and grouses.

13. Blue and white underglaze painted earthenware dish. China, date unknown. The cavetto is adorned with Dervish dancers alternating with calligraphic roundels inscribed "Allah is forgiving" and "Allah is all encompassing". A lotus blossom border at the centre encircles a landscape scene of a lake with carp and prawns, set against a background of mountains and pagodas.