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Twentieth-Century Mosque Architecture in East Asia: The Case of Taipei's Grand Mosque

Senibina Masjid abad ke-20 di Asia Timur: Kes Masjid Besar Taipei

Federica A. Broilo*

Abstract

Islam was introduced to Taiwan in two different periods via migrations of populations from the continent. The first one occurred in the seventeenth century in the wake of Ming loyalist Zheng Chenggong's campaign of resistance against the Qing. The later one was in the mid-twentieth century following Chiang Kai-shek's retreat to Taiwan after the defeat of the Nationalists in the Civil War against the Communist Party. Taipei's Grand Mosque was built in 1960 following the second migration of Muslim population from mainland China. At the end of the 1950s, the Chinese Muslim Association (CMA) in Taiwan commissioned the construction of Taipei's Grand Mosque to Chinese architect Yang Cho-cheng. The building, inaugurated in 1960 in front of several leaders of the Muslim world, is an architectural anomaly in Taipei's urban landscape and it has strangely been overlooked by the most relevant contemporary western literature on building mosques in non-Muslim countries. Three important mosques were built in non-Muslim countries in the first half of the twentieth century: the Jamia Mosque in Hong Kong (1915); the Kobe Mosque (1935); and the Old Tokyo Mosque (1938) in Japan. At first glance, Taipei's Grand mosque is immediately recognizable to the general public as a temple of Muslim faith, because it features elements traditionally associated with mosques, such as the dome, and the two slender minarets. For its design, the architect Yang Cho-cheng combined several Islamic architectural traditions (Umayyad, Fatimid, Safavid, and Ottoman) with new building techniques like the use of reinforced concrete. Even if it might look like some sort of architectural pastiche, it is actually the manifesto of the foreign politics of Taiwan in the 1960s. The following article is a detailed architectural analysis of Yang Cho-cheng's Grand Mosque and all the factors which led to its peculiar design.

Keywords: Taiwan, Islam, Islamic Architecture, Taipei, Mosque design, 1960s.

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Abstrak

Islam diperkenalkan ke Taiwan dalam dua tempoh yang berbeza melalui migrasi penduduk dari benua itu. Yang pertama berlaku pada abad ketujuh belas semasa kempen penentangan Ming Zheng Chenggong terhadap Qing. Yang kemudiannya adalah pada pertengahan abad kedua puluh selepas berundurinya Chiang Kai-shek ke Taiwan selepas kekalahan Nasionalis kepada Parti Komunis dalam Perang Saudara. Masjid Besar Taipei dibina pada tahun 1960 berikutan penghijrahan kedua penduduk Islam dari tanah besar China. Pada penghujung tahun 1950-an, Persatuan Cina Islam (CMA) di Taiwan telah menyerahkan kerja pembinaan Masjid Besar Taipei kepada arkitek Cina bernama Yang Cho-cheng. Bangunan yang dirasmikan pada tahun 1960 di hadapan beberapa pemimpin dunia Islam, adalah anomali seni bina lanskap di bandar Taipei tetapi ironinya kesusasteraan barat kontemporari seperti tidak mengiktiraf pembinaan masjid-masjid di negara bukan Islam. Terdapat tiga buah masjid penting yang telah dibina negara bukan Islam pada separuh tahun pertama abad kedua puluh: Masjid Jamia di Hong Kong (1915); Masjid Kobe (1935); dan Masjid Tokyo Lama (1938) di Jepun. Sekilas pandang, masjid Grand Taipei diketahui oleh masyarakat umum sebagai tempat pengibadatan orang Islam, kerana ia mempunyai unsur-unsur tradisi sebuah masjid, seperti mempunyai kubah, dan dua batang menara yang tinggi. Dalam reka bentuk senibinanya, arkitek Yang Cho-cheng telah menggabungkan beberapa tradisi seni bina Islam (Umayyad, Fatimid, Safavid, dan Uthmaniyyah) dengan teknik bangunan baru seperti penggunaan konkrit bertetulang. Walaupun ia kelihatan seperti sejenis karya senibina, ia sebenarnya adalah manifesto politik asing Taiwan pada tahun 1960-an. Artikel ini bertujuan menganalisa seni bina dengan terperinci mengenai Masjid Besar yang dibina oleh Yang Cho-cheng dan semua faktor yang membawa kepada keunikan reka bentuk seni binanya.

Kata Kunci: Taiwan, Islam, Arkitek Islam, Taipei, Rekabentuk Masjid, 1960s.

Introduction

Little has been discussed so far on the design of twentieth-century mosques in East Asia and even less has been written on Taiwanese Islamic architecture. In general, East Asia is overlooked in historical surveys about Islamic architecture by contemporary Western scholarship. *Architecture of the contemporary mosque*¹ and *The Mosque and the Modern World: Architects, Patrons, and Designs since the 1950s*² are, for instance, very authoritative surveys on the contemporary architectural scene. However exhaustive their analysis of numerous mosques around the world, none of them mentions mosques of Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan or South Korea. In the last decades, several advances have been made with regards to academic writing on the practice of Islam in non-

¹ SERAGELDIN, Ismail (ed.), *Architecture of the Contemporary mosque*, (London: Academy Editions, 1996).

² HOLOD, Renata (ed), *The Mosque and the Modern World: Architects, Patrons, and Designs since the 1950s*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

Muslim countries, but the main focus of these publications has been the West (broadly America and Europe). For instance, Akel Ismail Kahera's *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender and Aesthetics*³ has pursued important sociological and anthropological questions through architecture and explored the history and theory of Muslim religious aesthetics in the United States since the 1950s. Kishwar Rizvi's *The Transnational Mosque*⁴ takes a multifaceted approach to show how mosques and their architecture function symbolically and spatially as a medium for the communication of religious and political ideologies. These texts provide an extremely useful theoretical framework that doesn't apply only to the American or European mosques but also informs understanding of the forms and meanings of East Asian mosques included in this study. The reason why western literature has so far neglected modern East Asia cannot be easily explained unless we consider the relatively scarce presence of Islam in such countries as Japan or Taiwan. For instance, when compared to mainland China, the presence of Islam in Taiwan is quite recent. It was introduced to Taiwan in two different periods via migration of populations from the continent: first in the seventeenth century in the wake of Ming loyalist Zheng Chenggong's campaign of resistance against the Qing, and later in the mid-twentieth century following Chiang Kai-shek's retreat to Taiwan after the defeat of the Nationalists in the Civil War against the Communist Party led by Mao Zedong.⁵ After the handover of Taiwan from Japan to China in 1945, the Chinese Muslim Association (CMA) in Nanking appointed Chang Zichun, Wang Jingzhai, and Zheng Houren to form the preparatory committee of the CMA branch in Taiwan, which opened its door on 23 December 1947. The first place for Muslims to worship communally was set up shortly after the first arrivals in the spring of 1949. A Japanese-style home in Taipei was used for worship, networking, and as a place for new arrivals to stay until they found a home for themselves. A second Japanese-style home was set up as an alternative place of worship the following year. These two locations, in Da'an and Guting respectively, attracted many Muslims to find homes nearby. With the growing number of Chinese Muslims within the KMT government, the above-mentioned

³ KAHERA, Akel Ismail, *Deconstructing the American Mosque: Space, Gender, and Aesthetics*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

⁴ RIZVI, Kishwar, *The Transnational Mosque: Architecture and Historical Memory in the Contemporary Middle East*, (The University of North Carolina Press Books, 2015).

⁵ GOWING, Peter, "Islam on Taiwan", *Handbook of Oriental Studies 2* (Leiden/Köln: E.J. Brill, 1975), p.117.

locations suddenly became too small to accommodate the growing number of worshippers. Many Muslims felt that the use of two Japanese-style homes was a sad change from their situation in China. It was a loss of face to have to entertain visiting dignitaries in these small prayer halls.⁶ In the latter part of the 1950s, after the end of Chinese Civil War and the relocation of the Nationalist Government from Mainland China to Taiwan, Director-General of the CMA Bai Chongxi and ROC Minister of Foreign Affairs George Yeh proposed the construction of a bigger mosque. The design of the mosque was commissioned to Yang Chongcheng (1914-2006), a relatively young Chinese architect who had moved to Taiwan in 1946 with the Nationalist Government. The Taiwanese Government loaned two thirds of the money needed for the project, and in addition to that the CMA solicited funding from local and foreign sources, including substantial donations from Iran, Jordan, and Libya (around 150,000 US dollars) for a total cost of 250,000 US dollars.

Taipei Grand Mosque, Taiwan

Perhaps no one else introduces the Taipei Grand Mosque better than Nancy Shatzman-Steinhardt in the preface of her book *China's Early Mosques*:

The first mosque I entered was in Taipei in 1976. In Taiwan to both study Chinese language and Chinese architecture, I was totally taken by surprise one October afternoon when I turned onto section two of Xinsheng South Road and saw a tile and concrete building with two minarets. I was particularly struck by the contrast between the tile structure in front of me and the Confucian Temple where just ten days earlier I had watched the celebration of the sage's 2527th birthday. Ceremony, as well as wooden construction, rendered the courtyards that comprised the Confucian complex a perfect fit anywhere in China. The street front presence of the mosque thus made as strong an impression on me as the building materials. Even a few weeks in East Asia were sufficient to know that a Chinese building should always have a gate in front of it and almost never is visible from the street.⁷

This lively description by Professor Shatzman-Steinhardt is probably the best way to understand the impression that Taipei's Grand

⁶ PILLSBURY, Barbara, *Cohesion and Cleavage in a Chinese Muslim Minority*, (PhD dissertation, 1973), pp. 81-83.

⁷ STEINHARDT, Nancy Shatzman, *China's Early Mosques*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), Preface, p. xviii.

Mosque makes to the general public, either Westerner or Chinese. It is something completely different from what is expected from Chinese architecture. From a first glance, it doesn't even share any similarity with Islamic architecture in mainland China, where the untrained eye may easily confuse Muslims places of worships with Buddhist or Daoist temples. Of course, to understand the transcultural modern mosque it is necessary to pay equal attention to three determinant factors roled in the design of the modern mosque: the interests of the commissioning state; the background of the architect; and the public for whom the mosque is intended. The Grand Mosque's design and patronage reveal multiple transnational agents involved, from foreign governments such as Iran, Jordan, and Libya (and later Saudi Arabia) to local associations like the CMA.

The architect Yang Cho-cheng was born in 1914 in Hebei, China. He first attended Nankai University in Tianjin, majoring in chemistry. Because of the civil war in China, he transferred to National Southwestern Associated University in Kunming, Yunnan, and then to Zhongshan University in Guangzhou, Guangdong where his major also changed to architecture. He graduated in 1944 and moved to Taiwan in 1946 with the Nationalist government. In 1953, Yang established his own architectural firm: Ho-Mu Architect Associated. He died in 2006 in Los Angeles at the age of 92. In addition to the Taipei Grand Mosque, his well-known design projects include the Taipei Grand Hotel, the Chiang Kai-shek Cultural Center (Chiang Kai-shek Memorial, National Concert Hall, and National Theater).⁸

Yang Cho-cheng was known for going through extensive research for his projects. The Taipei Grand Mosque was no exception, and it is known that Yang sought advice from Middle Eastern dignitaries in Taiwan. It is interesting at this point to quote Haider's words on the risk of falling into self-Orientalism when building modern mosques:

In the choice of the architectural motifs [the design] should in no way reinforce the erroneous mythology of Near Eastern "Islamic" exotica [such as that found in] the Thousands and One Nights.⁹

⁸ I am personally indebted to Professor Fu Chao-Ching of the National Cheng Kung University for giving me the information on Yang Cho-cheng's biography.

⁹ KAHERA, Akel Ismail, *Deconstructing the American mosque: space, gender, and aesthetics*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), p.80; Haider, Gulzar, "Islamic Architecture in Non-Islamic Environments. In Places of Public Gathering in Islam", *Proceedings of Seminar 5 in the Series Architectural Transformations in the Islamic*

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This important point is reinforced by Nebahat Avcioglu's commentary on the struggle of designing modern mosques in non-Muslim countries without falling into the self-Orientalism because of what Haider defines as Freudian 'dome and minaret envy':¹⁰

Minarets are seen as the common domination of Turkish culture and so as well as Islam. The minaret together with the dome has become a structural metonym of Muslim identity that cannot longer be read in any other context than the one it pre-determined, even though there exist in the Muslim countries both old and new mosques with minarets and domes."¹¹

One recent voice opposing the myth of the "Orientalist" mosque is Eric Roose. In his article "*The Myth of the Orientalist Mosque: Towards an Iconography of Islamic Architecture in the Netherlands*", he argues that the mosques built in the Netherlands "sought to position themselves amongst the distinct Muslim communities, as competing leaders with mutually exclusive religious interpretations and power bases, in an internal struggle among patrons."¹² Roose highlights the role of 'ambitious patrons' who do not 'aim for the enhancement of a singular Muslim identity, but for that of their own religious legitimacy among their newly expanding Islamic constituencies.'¹³ Regardless of arguments by Haider, Avcioglu or Roose, a great number of the mosques selected for the *The Mosque and the Modern World: Architects, Patrons, and Designs since the 1950s* were indeed marked by minarets and domes. It's not a coincidence that the mosques and cultural centres funded by the Turkish government all around the world, from Berlin to Tokyo, are built by the Istanbul-based architect Hilmi Şenalp and his firm Hassa Mimarlik. At first, those neo-Ottoman style buildings seem pretty anachronistic; in fact, one might be completely shocked by the sixteenth-century-looking Tokyo Cami in Shibuya. But in Şenalp's view, this mosque provides "historical continuity" for a Turkish nation that financed the

World Held in Amman, Jordan, May 4-7, 1980, edited by Linda Safran, New York: Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1980, pp. 123.

¹⁰ HOLOD, Renata, *The Mosque and the Modern World: Architects, Patrons, and Designs since the 1950s*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), pp. 220-221.

¹¹ AVCIOĞLU, Nebahat, "Identity-as-form: the Mosque in the West", (*Cultural Analysis*, 6: 2007), p. 91.

¹² ROOSE, Eric, "The Myth of the Orientalist Mosque. Towards an Iconography of Islamic Architecture in the Netherlands", *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies*, 2012, p. 83.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 103.

construction of the mosque, celebrating the classical period of Ottoman art and history as the “epitome” of Turkish civilization.¹⁴

It is interesting that Yang almost bypassed more than one thousand years of Chinese Islamic architecture and designed something that appeals to the Middle Eastern sponsors and the diplomats, rather than to the local Muslim community. One architectural element that really points in this direction is the double driveway in front of the mosque’s main entrance. It is purposely built for representative cars and limousines to drop their VIP guests exactly on the front portico. This feature is not common in the field of Islamic architecture, but it seems to appear again in Taiwan in the 1990s and specifically in the Kaohsiung Mosque in the Lingya District, Kaohsiung. The design of the prayer hall with its high glass windows, the self-supported dome and the outer driveway are articulated like the ones at Taipei’s Grand Mosque, a model that Yang’s unusual building had set for Islamic architecture in Taiwan. And there are at least another two examples that show Taipei Grand Mosque’s influence on the shape of the prayer hall: the Taichung Mosque in the Nantun District, Taichung and the Longgang Mosque or Lungkang in the Zhongli District, Taoyuan City.

The exterior

The Grand Mosque is characterized by a number of important symbolic and architectural elements. It respects the principle of bilateral symmetry, a principle very dear to Chinese architecture where the halves of a composition should mirror each other. A monumental portico with three horseshoe arches supported on columns is built on a platform of five steps above ground level and provides access to the reception area, and from that to the prayer hall. Overall, the spatial composition of the façade with the triple arch, the side buttresses topped by domes and the central arcade reflects the façade of the Umayyad Mosque (709-715), also known as the Great Mosque of Damascus, located in the old city of Damascus and built by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid I. The inspiration for the side portico with its round arches belongs to the same building. The exterior decoration of Taipei’s Grand Mosque is kept minimal. The main concrete body is covered in grey slabs of stone. The central arcade above the monumental portico makes use of pre-cast concrete blocks to

¹⁴ RIZVI, Kishwar, *The Transnational Mosque: Architecture and Historical Memory in the Contemporary Middle East*, (The University of North Carolina Press Books, 2015), p. 56.

add some lightness to the composition. Transparency without a glazed medium can be found in the Middle Eastern devices of the *mashrabiyya* and *jali*. There are only three decorative elements that interrupt the austerity of the exterior: the pre-cast concrete blocks (mentioned above); the geometric carved bands that frame both the arcade and the windows; and finally the geometric mosaic. This last element deserves a little analysis because of its peculiarity.

The geometric band of progressive interlacing diamonds is a distant echo of Timurid decoration, like the one that can be seen in the polychrome tilework that characterizes many of the mausoleums in the Shah-i Zinda complex, located on the south side of the Afrasiyab hill in the city of Samarqand. The difference is in the choice of the colours used for the Taipei Grand Mosque. While the Timurid palette is based on the combination of dark blue, turquoise and yellow, Yang chose a very unusual combination of beige, white, black and red. Red is not a very common color in Islamic architecture. This could have been either a nod to the aboriginal Taiwanese culture and its artistry for inwoven artifacts decorated with geometric bands where the dominant color is red. It may also be an involuntary reference to the traditional Chinese architecture of which Yang was specialist.

Overall, the articulation of the exterior façade is fairly reminiscent of the contemporary Masjid Salah al-Din by Aly Khairat in Cairo whose design program was defined in 1958 and completed in 1959 (construction began in 1960 and ended in 1962).¹⁵

The prayer hall and the dome

The main prayer hall is conceived on a square plan. The prayer room has eight tall floor-to-ceiling keel-shaped arched windows, four on each side of the room. The keel-shaped arch emerges as a common feature in the Fatimid architecture of Egypt, a feature that was borrowed from the Coptic tradition. In modernist Islamic architecture, keel-shaped arches appear predominantly in Mario Rossi's work in Egypt and abroad. Rossi is also the architect responsible for the introduction of concrete as a building material in mosque architecture, a choice followed by Yang later for Taipei's Grand Mosque. A very good example of Rossi's work is the Islamic Centre in Washington DC (USA), built in the 1950s and modeled on pre-modern Cairene Mamluk architecture.

¹⁵ Aly Kairat's work has been heavily influenced by Mario Rossi.

The treatment of windows of the prayer hall is particularly interesting. Those are tall and narrow windows, with keel-shaped profile and a radiating fluted frame on the crown. The windows are screened with decorative pre-casted concrete blocks which are characteristic details of the 1950s aesthetics. The inspiration comes from the traditional *jali* or *jaaliis*, a perforated stone or latticed screen, usually with an ornamental pattern constructed through the use of geometry. This form of architectural decoration is common in Islamic architecture because it permits natural, subdued light into the building. *Jali* screens were usually made of stone, marble or even stucco, thus the employment of pre-casted concrete blocks is a modernist rendition of a traditional feature. Windows of the mosque are double-sided. The tilting windows can be opened outwards for better ventilation of the prayer hall and are embellished with colorful squares of stained glass. On the other hand, the outer layer of windows is made with decorative concrete blocks made of precast concrete. Even though the *jali* helps in lowering the temperature by compressing the air through the holes, the prayer hall still needs to be mechanically cooled with ventilators due to the city's hot climate. Tall keel-arched glass windows could also be found decorating the prayer hall of the already non-existent Old Tokyo Camii (1938-1986).

The prayer hall itself is square in plan and is reminiscent of the Ottoman centralized dome type. The dome is self-supporting and has a circular clerestory drum with sixteen windows. Its exterior was originally covered with polished brass. Under the influence of local climatic conditions, the golden color had turned to green in just a decade. It remained so until the dome was restored to its original shine in 2015. The most iconic golden dome in Islamic architecture is undoubtedly the gilded wooden central dome of the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem built by the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik and completed in 691. Like the dome at the Taipei Grand Mosque, the Dome of the Rock has also sixteen windows. But by the time of Taipei Grand Mosque' construction, the wooden dome in Jerusalem didn't have the shiny appearance that it has nowadays. In fact, quite opposite is true: it was covered in blackened lead. Only in the course of a substantial restoration carried out from 1959 to 1962 was the lead replaced by aluminium-bronze plates covered with gold leaf. Golden domes are a frequent feature of Safavid and Qajar architecture in Persia, in particular in holy cities like Qom or Mashad, where they mark the most important part of the Shiite shrine. A good example is the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, Iraq, also known as the Golden Mosque for its golden dome added by Nasir ad-Din Shah

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Qajar in 1905. Golden domes have been proved popular also in early twentieth century South East Asia, like the Masjid Ubudiah in Kuala Kangsar, Perak, Malaysia (1917), and the Masjid Sultan in Singapore (1928).

Interestingly, Taipei's Grand Mosque is not the first domed building of Taiwan. In fact, there are at least two historical precedents of dome architecture in Taipei belonging to the period of the Japan's colonial regime (1895-1945). The first, the Higashi Hongan-ji (the Eastern Temple of the Original Vow), was the head quarter of the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land Buddhism) school, one of Japan's biggest Buddhist denominations. It was rebuilt in 1936 because of a fire. The exterior of the temple was a reference to Hindu-style architecture and the first of its kind in Taiwan. It was designed and supervised by the Matsui group of Matsui Kakueisha. The Matsui group had previously been contracted for the rebuilding of the Tsukiji Hongan-ji in Tokyo between 1931 and 1934 following the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923. The outer appearance, inspired by the chaitya no.9 at the Ajanta Caves, was designed by Itō Chūta of the University of Tokyo, a leading architect and architectural theorist of early 20th century Imperial Japan.

There are few elements that are worthy of mentioning about the Higashi Hongan-ji in relation to Taipei's Grand Mosque. First is its material: reinforced concrete as innovation. Second, the Higashi Hongan-ji is also built on a platform that rises above ground level and provides access to the reception area, and from that to the prayer hall. The articulation of the façade is particularly interesting since the entrance to the hall is preceded by a classical portico with a triple opening on columns flanked by two buttresses (the one on the south has also the function of clock tower). Lastly, the dome of the Higashi Hongan-ji is very similarly shaped to the dome of Taipei's Grand Mosque.

Beside the Higashi Hongan-ji, there is another example of domed architecture from the 1930s that sets an antecedent to the Grand Mosque's eclectic style: this is the Kenko Jinja or Kenko Shrine, a Shinto temple located in Nanhai Road. It was originally designed with a Romanesque-style façade with triple round arches, a dome on a clerestory with sixteen windows, and a Chinese-style main gate.¹⁶

¹⁶ NISHIZAWA, Yasuhiko, "A Study of Japanese Colonial Architecture in East Asia", *Constructing the Colonized Land: Entwined Perspectives of East Asia around WWII*, edited by Izumi Kuroishi (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 33.

The rear *mihrab* hall

The *mihrab* on the *qiblah* wall has been an essential feature of mosque architecture since the beginning of the eighth century when the Mosque of the Prophet at Medina was provided with one.¹⁷ *Mihrabs* vary in size and decoration and serve to mark the place from where Muhammad himself had led the prayer and, to complement the *qiblah* as a directional indicator of the Kaa'ba in Mecca, towards which Muslims should face when praying. Conceived as a niche in the *qiblah* wall, *mihrabs* have taken different shapes throughout history according to the regional development of Islamic architecture: some of them are flat, but some of them are concave, polygonal or, recessed, so as to form a separate chamber. In Taipei's Grand Mosque, the *mihrab* belongs to the last group: it is no longer just a niche in the *qiblah* wall, but it is a rear polygonal hall, in the shape of a half-octagon. The rear hall has two tall rectangular stained glass windows that open like a book to let the natural light in. It follows the architectural tradition of northern and northeastern China where the *mihrab* often has the shape of a carved archway preceded by a decorative arched screen.¹⁸ The most vivid example of this is certainly the rear *mihrab* hall of the Niujie Mosque in Beijing with its wooden triple archway. While there is little doubt that the Niujie Mosque in Beijing is the source of inspiration for the rear *mihrab* hall of Taipei Grand Mosque and its spatial arrangement, the decorative materials and techniques differ a lot from the one in Beijing. In Taipei, the arches are horseshoe-shaped while in Beijing they are cusped-shaped. The simple horseshoe arch fits the austere modernist style which characterizes Taipei's Grand Mosque.

The most famous horseshoe-shaped *mihrab* is the one commissioned by the second Umayyad Caliph of Al-Andalus, al-Hakam II (961-976), for the Mezquita of Cordoba (Spain). The *mihrab* was unprecedented for taking the form of an entire room rather than the traditional niche on the *qiblah* wall. Unlike the *mihrab* of the Mezquita, the one in Taipei is a triple archway. Now, the triple archway in combination with the horseshoe-shaped arch is to be found in a rare carpet belonging to a small group of Ottoman court prayer rugs, nowadays in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Arts. The design of a

¹⁷ HILLENBRAND, Robert, *Islamic architecture: Form, Function, and Meaning*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), pp. 45-46.

¹⁸ QIU, Yulan; SUN, Dazhang. *Islamic Buildings* (Springer-Verlag: China Architectural Industry Press, 2003), p. 63.

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triple-arched gateway to paradise was probably created in or near Istanbul in the later part of the sixteenth century. Triple niches probably originated in Egypt and can be found in the Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk periods.¹⁹ It must be also pointed out that a triple *mihrab* niche is to be found in the *qiblah* wall of the Jamia Mosque in Hong Kong and also in the *qiblah* wall of the Old Tokyo Camii, nowadays no longer standing.

But in Taipei's Grand Mosque, the triple archway divides up the great prayer hall from the rear *mihrab* hall, setting it apart and emphasizes its special religious atmosphere with the help of the bright light that filters through the stained glass. Natural light appears to be the only decorative element of this *mihrab*, a more or less wanted reference from the 25th *ayat* of *Sūrat an-Nūr*, the 24th *sura* of the Qur'ān where Allah is said to be the "Light of the Heavens and Earth." There are not many examples of *mihrabs* that make use of natural light to represent the divine. The most spectacular example is, undoubtedly, the *mihrab* in the Grand National Assembly Mosque in Ankara, Turkey. Built between 1985-9 this mosque flaunts a completely see-through *mihrab* in plexiglass, through which a sunken garden and a cascade pool can be admired by the worshippers.²⁰

The minarets

On the outside, the prayer hall is flanked by two tall minarets, each of which is twenty meters high. They are also made of reinforced concrete. The shaft of the minarets is cylindrical and has a circular covered balcony wider than the shaft and resting on a double circular fascia. The balcony's balustrade is made out of vertical rectangular panels of what looks like reinforced concrete painted in red, each one decorated with golden Kufic writing. The writing on the panels is extremely peculiar. On each panel, the word "Allāh" (الله) is painted vertically, with the addition of an extra vertical 'alif (ا) positioned along the length of the main writing and a hā' (ه), mirroring the last letter of Allāh, which is also a hā' (ه). The final result obtained with those additions is a visually pleasing sort of ideogram that follows the principle of bilateral symmetry so dear to both Chinese and Islamic art and architecture. The minaret is also

¹⁹ WILLIAMS, Caroline, "The Cult of 'Alid Saints in the Fatimid Monuments of Cairo Part II: The Mausolea", (*Muqarnas*, 1985), pp. 48-49.

²⁰ HOLID, Renata, *The Mosque and the Modern World: Architects, Patrons, and Designs since the 1950s*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997) p. 105.

the place from where the name of Allāh is called five times a day for the mandatory worship, making the writing on the panels a very befitting decoration for the building's function. A smaller cylindrical shaft in perforated concrete topped with a bulb rises from the balcony. Right under the bulb, the shaft is decorated with gold and red mosaics. Unlike the dome in the prayer hall and the two smaller domes on the buttresses of the main façade, which are covered in golden-colored brass sheets, the bulbs of the minarets are left in exposed reinforced concrete which had been painted in red. The metal finial (*alem*) that caps these bulbs is made of superimposed globes and is topped with a crescent. Overall, the shape of the minaret is inspired by Safavid minarets in Iraq such as the ones at the Mosque of 'Alī, located in Najaf or the ones at the Shrine of Husayn in Kerbala. Those minarets in fact are characterized by a cylindrical shaft and a single roofed balcony like the ones at Taipei's Grand Mosque. The minaret's choice, as well as the gilded dome, could be explained with the fact that a consistent donation for the realization of Taipei's Grand Mosque came from the Shah of Iran.

Conclusion

In April 2018, the mayor of Taipei, Mr. Ko Wen-je signed the official document for the construction of a new mosque in Taipei, a joint project with the financial help of the Turkish government. Mr. Ko had previously visited Turkey in February, where he discussed the funding for a new mosque in Taipei with the local authorities. In May, the chairman of Taipei Grand Mosque, Mr. Feng Tung-yu, said that the Turkish government was planning to donate a mosque to Taipei, as “the Taipei Grand Mosque is too small for the Muslim community's needs”. The offer was made by the Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, to serve Muslims in Taiwan, which are sixty-thousand locals and some three hundred-thousand foreigners, including diplomats, businessman, students and South-Asian workers. Considering the architectural model applied to other Diyanet's foundations, such as the new Tokyo Camii (1998-2000), located in the Ōyama-chō district of Shibuya, there is little doubt that the new mosque will celebrate the classical period of Ottoman architecture. External factors will again play a defining role in determining the architectural appearance of a mosque today, just like they did before.

Taipei's Grand Mosque, in fact, doesn't present any strong resemblance to mainland Islamic Chinese architecture, despite the trend of the so called “Sinic Revival”, which reached its climax in the mid-1960s

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and which characterised most of the architectural practices in the physical and ideological construction of post-war Taiwan. The intentions and actions involved in the design and creation of the Grand Mosque suggest that the CMA and Yang intended to create a purposeful combination of prototypical examples from Islamic architectural history. Nonetheless, the overall “self-Orientalist” appearance and its major reception’s features, such the double driveway at the entrance, is explainable only by the Taiwanese government’s desire to attract in their anti-communist sphere certain key countries, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, to gain and maintain bilateral relations, to activate trade and investment exchanges in opposition to People’s Republic of China’s rising economy.

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