

# THE GREAT MOSQUE OF HOHHOT (QINGZHEN DASI), INNER MONGOLIA, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA—MORE THAN A MOSQUE

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## ABSTRACT

*Great Mosque of Hohot (Qingzhen Dasi) being the oldest mosque still erected since last four centuries in the city of Hohhot (Capital city of Inner Mongolia), P. R. China has always been important to the Muslim community there. It is undoubtedly true that the mosque should play an important role in the society and should witness many events that may involve in developing the Muslim community within their society. Mosques even during the time of prophet Muhammad Peace be upon him played several roles like; a place for worship, a place for reading, a place for negotiation, a place for treating sick persons and so on.*

*In this regard it is very interesting to note the present roles of Great Mosque (Qingzhen Dasi) for the development of community of Muslims in the city of Hohhot. Being located in one of the remote areas of China, where Muslims in China are one of the minorities in the majority of the non Muslims. The Great Mosque (Qingzhen Dasi) is playing tremendous roles not only for Muslims in the city of Hohhot but it is also considered as one of the important land mark as well as the urban node of the city. This paper unfolds all those tremendous roles of Great Mosque (Qingzhen Dasi) playing for the benefits of the Muslims as well as non Muslims in the city of Hohhot and recommends conserving the Mosque for the future generations.*

**Key words:** *Great Mosque of Hohot, Muslim community, Inner Mongolia, conservation*

## 1.1 Introduction

The mosque, namely the Great Mosque of Hohhot, or known as in Chinese's language "Qingzhen Dasi", portrays very unique and significant architectural features. Built of brick and wooden structure, the Great Mosque is the largest and the oldest mosque out of a total of eleven (11) mosques in Hohhot city (The capital city of Inner Mongolia).



*Figure 1.1: Entrance to the Main Prayer Hall, Qingzhen Dasi*



*Figure 1.2: Front gateway and stalls of the Great Mosque, Hohhot*

Based on the text written on the stone tablet at the contributor's area, the Great Mosque was said to be constructed in Kang Xi 22 Year, around 1693. It was built during the reign of Emperor Kang Xi of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 A.D) after throngs of the Hui Muslim minority migrated from Xinjiang to Mongolia. Since its construction, the mosque still stands strong for 316 years. Qingzhen Dasi went through an extension in Qian Long 54 Year in 1789, and was remedied several times in 1869, 1892, 1896, 1923 and 1939. According to an Imam of a nearby mosque in Hohhot, Miao Zhi Xin, the mosque serves as a centre for all the Muslims in Hohhot. Now, the mosque is protected under the local government and is listed in the Hohhot Heritage List. The character of the architecture today mainly represents of the 1920s.

## 1.2 Location of the Mosque

Located in Hohhot city, which is the capital city of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, the Great mosque of Hohhot stands elegantly on the east of South Tongdao Street near the Zhongshan Xi Lu intersection in Hui Min district. Hui Min is one of the four districts in Hohhot city.

The whole mosque compound area covers about 5000m<sup>2</sup> encompassing courtyards are prayer halls, hostels and *madrassahs*. The total area of the Main Prayer Hall is around 435m<sup>2</sup> and

accommodate up to 600 people at one time. The extended prayer hall and sometimes the courtyard are used if the number of people increases.

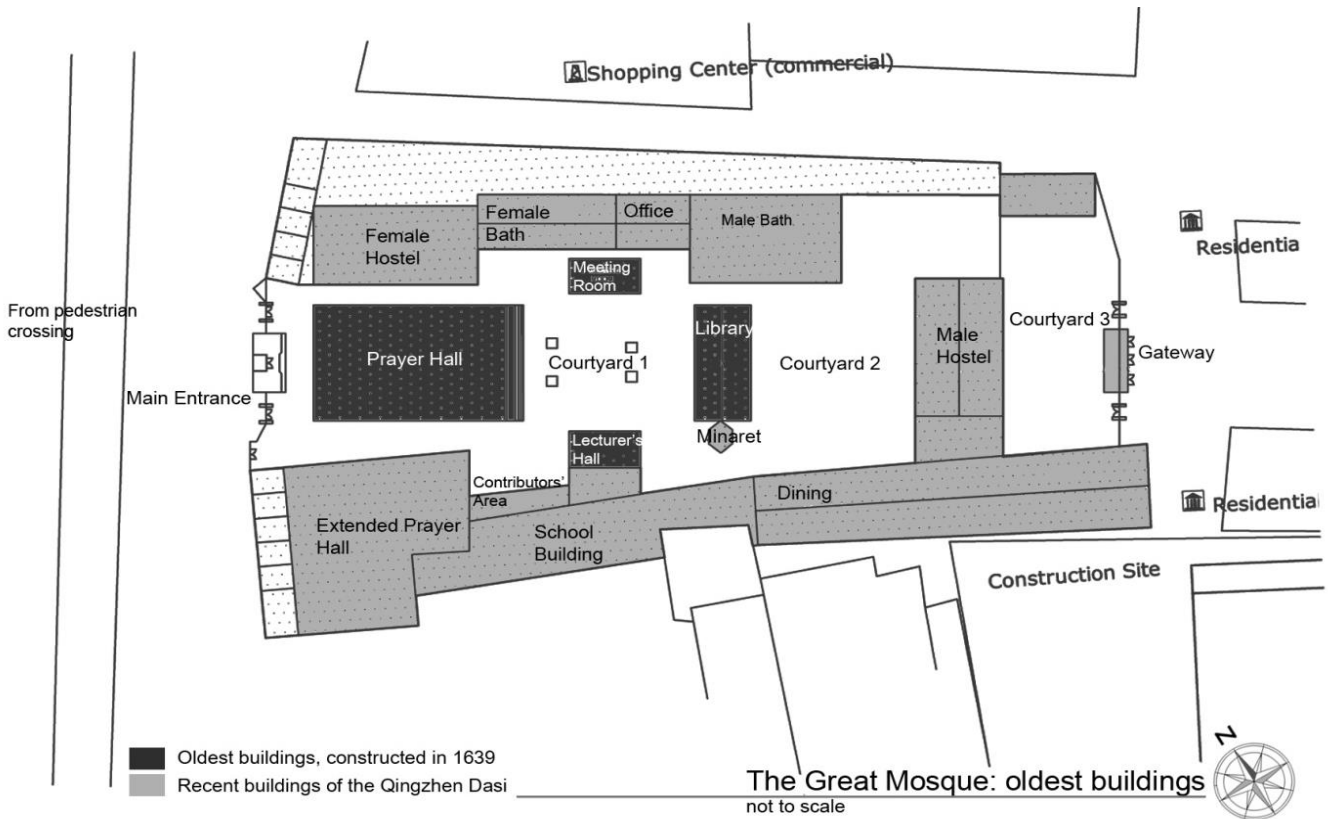


Figure 1.3: Site Plan showing the location of the Great Mosque in the city of Hohhot



Figure 1.4: Zhongshan Xi Lu intersection  
Near by the Great Mosque, in the city of  
Hohhot



Figure 1.5: People crossing the road at  
South Tongdao Street in Hohhot

Due to the government's effort in recent years to promote the culture of ethnic minorities in Hohhot, the South Tongdao Street since then is well-known for its Islamic architecture themed street. It is therefore appropriate to mention that the Great Mosque, located facing the

South Tongdao Street, is a prominent landmark on the street proudly representing the Muslim minority, namely the *Hui* people of Hohhot. Surrounding the Great Mosque are commercial areas, institutional buildings and residential areas which adds to the hustle and bustle life in the city. Further down from Zhongshan Xi Lu intersection is a Dabei street famous for the Mongolian architectural styles on the facades of the buildings.



*Figure 1.6: South Tongdao Street, or known as Muslim street*



*Figure 1.7: View of the Great Mosque from across the South Tongdao Street.*



*Figure 1.8: View of West Zhongshan road*



*Figure 1.9: View of the street of Dabei with Mongolian identity.*

### **1.3 The Architecture of the Mosque**

According to Miao Zhi Xin (Director of Mosque), the Great Mosque was originally designed by a Han native named Ba Shien Er, a non-Muslim from Xansi province. Built during the Qing dynasty in 1693, the mosque mostly adopts the ancient Chinese style of construction method of that dynasty. The main structural framing is mainly made of wood, which according to ancient Chinese architecture plays a significant role in symbolizing 'life'. The super structure is made

of thick brick wall in order to resist the cold weather of Hohhot, while the roof tiles are made of clay tiles similar to most buildings in China.

The traditional Chinese architecture usually involves construction of several buildings in a complex flanked around the courtyard. The orientation of main buildings is to North and South, whereas rest of supporting buildings within complex are oriented along East and West.

This kind of concept of orientation of buildings can be seen in the complex of Great Mosque too with slight change in the direction of main prayer hall facing to Mecca (Qibla) instead of facing to North and South. The architectural characteristic of the main Prayer Hall is quite unique as it portrays a mixture of Chinese and Arabic design with some influences of Mongolian art in its ornamentations. The building itself is elevated on a raised platform and distinguished itself from other buildings with an elegantly symmetrical look.

The interior of the prayer hall is highly decorated with Arabic calligraphy and floral ornamentations painted with bright colours. The *mihrab*, indicates the direction of *qiblah* for prayers. The ceiling is also beautifully decorated with paintings of natural phenomenon and floral elements.



*Figure 1.10: The roof style shows influence of ancient Chinese architecture*



*Figure 1.11: Courtyard surrounded by buildings with the principle of symmetry in axis.*



*Figure 1.12: View inside the Main Prayer Hall*      *Figure 1.13: Mihrab in the prayer hall*



*Figure 1.14: Front view of the main prayer hall*      *Figure 1.15: The Moon-watching tower/minaret*

The minaret, also known as “awakening Tower”, “Bangke Tower”, and “Moon-watching Tower”, was built later on during the period of Republic of China, around 1939. On top of the minaret, a crescent-shaped lamp is fixed at the peak with an impressive hexagonal pagoda style roof. The minaret is a 5-storeyed hexagonal brick edifices super imposed by Chinese style pavilion. Some parts of the minaret adopted Arabic style which has tall and slender hexagonal walls made of smartly arranged brick and stone. The top of the minaret ends with a Chinese style pavilion. The simplicity of the decoration is to give attention to the pagoda roof, making it the most prominent and tallest structure in the compound. At night, the minaret brightens up with colourful lights, creating a lively scene along the South Tongdao Street.



*Figure 1.16: Front gateway of Hohhot Great Mosque (Qingzhen Dasi)*



*Figure 1.17: Contributor's area*



*Figure 1.18: Teacher's Hall*



*Figure 1.19: Arabic calligraphy at the side of the Teacher's Hall*



*Figure 1.20: Dining hall*

#### **1.4 Functions of the Great Mosque**

The Great Mosque of Hohhot not only serves as a place of worship but it also caters for other purposes such as a place for religious education, community centre, a place to conduct wedding

ceremonies, funerals, and other related Islamic activities. This concept of multi-functionalism makes the mosque different from other religious buildings as well as it is in line with concept of functions of the Mosques during the time of Prophet Mohammad Peace be upon him. Architecturally, the mosque has a series of individual buildings with its specific functions all gathered in a compound which eventually forming a large complex.

### 1.4.1 Congregational Prayer

The five daily prayers is an obligation for all the Muslims, and to perform it congregationally is part of the *sunnah*. The most important purpose of constructing a mosque is to provide a place where the Muslims nearby can gather and perform congregational prayer every day. This mosque provides all the facilities for congregational prayers for male as well as for females.



*Figure 1.21: The prayer hall during Friday prayer in the Prayer Hall of Qingzhen*



*Figure 1.22: The students are line up in two lines with the Imam in the centre before entering the Main Prayer Hall at the Qingzhen Dasi, Hohhot*

Other than the five daily prayers, the mosque is also a place for performing Friday prayer, *Eid al-fitr* and *Qurban* rituals. Interestingly, before the congregational prayer, the students of the *madrassah* will queue at the courtyard in two straight lines as soon as the *azan* or the call for prayer is heard. The chief Imam queues together with the students and waits for the *azan* to end before making his way into the hall, followed by the students. This formation is said to symbolize the strength and unity of the Muslim armies as they march into the battle field and reflects the discipline of the Chinese Muslims in China



### 1.4.2 Mosque as Education Centre

As a centre for all the Muslims in Hohhot, the Great Mosque of Hohhot also functions as an education centre. The Great Mosque serves as a place for the students to acquire Islamic knowledge. Male and Female classroom blocks and hostels are separated in order to have a privacy in between. The female classrooms are located facing the north side of the mosque compound, while the male classrooms are located at the south side and hostels for male and female are provided within mosque compound. Whatever contributions or income that the mosque receives is also spent for educational purpose in the mosque so that the students do not have to pay the fees, foods and lodging.



*Figure 1.23: The students gather around the courtyard in the Hohhot Great Mosque*



*Figure 1.24: Students are learning Islamic education in the madrasah at the mosque*

### 1.4.3 Wedding Ceremony

In Hohhot, it is common that the family from both sides invite the Imam of the mosque to conduct the *aqad nikah*. It is said to be the tradition of the Muslims in China to organize such events in the mosque. In Qingzhen Dasi, the wedding ceremony is usually conducted in the restaurant or the multipurpose room in the mosque compound. The groom would carry the bride to the wedding ceremony area after the *aqad nikah* is completed, and the wedding is celebrated in a very cheerful manner.



*Figure 1.25: The groom carrying the bride to the wedding ceremony in the Great Mosque Eid al-fitr celebrations*



*Figure 1.26: One of the entertaining performances at the courtyard during*

#### **1.4.4 Celebration of religious festivals**

During the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims would break their fast at the restaurant in the Mosque complex. During *Eid al-fiti* or other religious festivals, the mosque opens its doors to the community of Muslims and welcomes them with many events and programmes arranged in the Mosque. The *Eid* prayers would be conducted in the prayer hall, gatherings and performances would be at the courtyard and feast would be at the restaurant or the multipurpose rooms of the Mosque.

#### **1.4.5 Funeral**

Another purpose of the mosque is to manage funerals for deceased Muslims. The *Janazah*, or the body of the decease will be carried by men who wears traditional white headgears and having white cloths wrapped around their waist. The *Janazah* prayer will be conducted congregationally outside at the courtyard to pay respect to the deceased before he or she is buried.

#### **1.4.6 Economy of Mosque**

In order to generate income to overcome mosque expenditures, the mosque administration runs a restaurant that serves *Halal* food specifically for the Muslims. Besides that, shops and houses are rented to the local people to generate more income. The stalls in front of the mosque for example, sell various choices of *halal* foods and drinks. As an antiquity which is protected by

law, the Great Mosque is also subsidized at some extent by the local government; however lamaseries and temples get more attention and are subsidized fully by the government.



Figure 1.27: The stalls of Mosque are rented to the locals in front of the Qingzhen Dasi



Figure 1.28: The dining hall usually rented for special occasion inside the Great Mosque

Besides that, part of the mosque compound is rented to a public school that is also one of the sources of income for the mosque. According to Mr Miao Zhi Xin (The director of the Mosque), the average annual income for the mosque is around RMB 200,000. The money is spent for maintenance, other religious activities and the education in the mosque.

## 1.5 The functions of the Prophet's mosque during the prophet time

### 1.5.1 The place for congregational prayers

The Prophet (peace be upon him), in many sayings (*hadith*) has encouraged frequenting and patronizing the mosques promising abundant rewards. He, for instance, said that a prayer offered in congregation is twenty five or twenty seven times more superior in reward to that which is offered alone;<sup>1</sup> that those whose hearts are attached to the mosques are promised God's shade on the Day of Judgment when there will be no shade but His.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-Salah, Hadith No, 466

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Kitab al-Salah, Hadith No. 629

### 1.5.2 Learning centre

Pursuing and transmitting knowledge is one of the noblest and most rewarding things that man can do in this terrestrial life. Since at first there were no schools it was natural that the mosques became the first learning centers in Islam with the Prophet's mosque as an energetic standard setter. While encouraging the people to make use of the mosques for the said purpose, the Prophet (peace be upon him), revealed: "... He who treads the path in search of knowledge

Allah will make with it the path which leads to Jannah easy for him. And those persons who assemble in a house of Allah's Houses (mosques) and recite the Qur'an learning and teaching it among themselves, there would descend upon them the tranquility, and mercy would cover them, and the angels would surround them, and Allah makes a mention of them in the presence of those near Him..."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Muslim, Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Dhikr wa al-Du'a wa al-Tawbah wa al-Istigfar, Hadith No. 6518.

### **1.5.3 The seat of government**

The mosque of the Prophet (peace be upon him), played the role of the seat of the first Islamic government. The Prophet (peace be upon him), used to discuss, decide and execute in it many affairs related to administering the state. Jihad and state defense strategies were initiated and wrapped up in the mosque compound. In this mosque, the Prophet (peace be upon him), was receiving foreign dignitaries. A tent was set up in the mosque where from time to time some of the Prophet's guests would stay. Some guests would stay even in the *suffah*.

### **1.5.4 Welfare centre**

The Prophet's mosque also served as a charity centre. We have already referred to the *suffah* which was set up in a corner of the northern wall of the mosque where the poorest companions resided.

### **1.5.5 Prison**

The prophet's mosque partly functioned as a prison too. It was reported that a man called Thumama b. Uthal from Bani Hanifah from Najd had been captured and fastened to one of the pillars of the mosque. But the Prophet, (peace be upon him), later came and ordered some of his people to release him. The man thereupon went to a garden, took a bath and entered the mosque proclaiming *shahadah*, i.e. he embraced Islam.<sup>4</sup> Male captives as well as female captives were held in what can be called as the mosque prison. For the latter, an enclosed space near one of the mosque entrances was allocated.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-Salah, Hadith No. 451

<sup>5</sup> Al-Kattani, *al-Taratib al-Idariyyah*, vol. 1 p. 299

### **1.5.6 Hospital**

There was also a place for a kind of hospital in the Prophet's mosque. Some tents had been erected there for this purpose. On the day of the battle of the Trench (*al-khandaq*) the companion Sa'd b. Mu'adh was injured and the Prophet (peace be upon him), pitched a tent in the mosque so that he could be looked after properly. Besides, he wanted very much to be near him so as to visit him on a regular basis and monitor his situation. The Rufaydah was the most renowned woman of those who were nursing the sick and wounded.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Al-Kattani, *al-Taratib al-Idariyyah*, vol. 1 p. 454

### **1.5.7 The place for some legitimate recreational activities**

The mosque of the Prophet (peace be upon him), was a place where some sport and recreation activities were occasionally held, both inside and outside. A'ishah, the Prophet's wife, narrated that she once saw the Prophet (peace be upon him), at the door of her house watching some Ethiopians who were playing in the mosque properly displaying their skill with spears, whereupon she joined him.<sup>7</sup> 'Umar b. al-Khattab scolded the same group, but the Prophet, (peace be upon him), asked him to leave them. And to them he said that they were safe and should carry on.<sup>8</sup>

Also, immediately after the sunset prayer (*maghrib*) the companions sometimes used to compete in archery inside or outside the mosque in the Prophet's presence till the full darkness descended and the targets became no longer visible.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-Salah, Hadith No. 445

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Kitab al-'Idayn, Hadith No. 103

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Kitab Mawaqit al-Salah, Hadith No. 534

### **1.5.8 A code of reverence for the mosques**

The mosque are to be maintained clean and tidy for cleanliness is the part of the faith (*iman*); as is removing impediments, big or small, from roads and public places. The Prophet (peace be upon him), said that the rewards of his people had been presented before him, so much so that even the reward for removing a mote by a person from the mosque was presented to him.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Kitab al-Salah, Hadith No. 461

## **1.5 Conclusion**

There are evidences in Muslim majority countries that the mosques; especially at the neighbourhood scale are confined only to the functions of congregational prayers. In some countries even females are not allowed to enter in the mosques. Whereas after reviewing the functions of mosques during the time of prophet, it wonders to know the multi functionality of the mosques. Accordingly mosques should be the place for prayer; a place for education; a place for entertainment; a place for negotiation and so on. So much so it should be the centre of civilization and cultural development of the Muslims. In this regard it is very interesting to know the functions of the said mosque in the place where Muslims are in minority and have considered all the necessary values of the mosque for the healthy development of the Muslims living in the neighbourhood of the mosque despite of comparatively less exposure and Islamic religious opportunities and have set the best example for the Muslims living in Muslim majority countries.

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