FORMATION OF SINO-ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY ALONG
THE SILK ROUTES: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY

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Introduction

Though the origin of calligraphy in Muslim countries, perhaps, is
the practice of writing the Qur’an, Hadith and the like in Arabic
language, but with the expansion of the sphere of Islamic culture, this
art gradually picked up acquaintance with the aesthetic values and
tastes and characteristic behavior of the language of various lands
and regions. Thus, a process of interaction and change set in which
brought about a variety of styles of writing. For such interactions to
take place a network of communication was needed, and the famous
Silk Route provided the link.

For a very long time the “Silk Route” (comprising both the
land and see routes) was the most important path of travel and of
communication. It was through this network of land and nautical
routes that mankind experienced for the very first time a multifaceted
process of globalization. Through the Silk Route cultures met, ideas
traveled, religions spread and carried with them their languages,
scripts and customs. Islam in the course of its spread to many Eastern
and Far Eastern countries traveled through this very network. The
new faith not only transformed the heart and the worldview of the
peoples who embraced it, but also gave birth to new scripts and the
language that came with them.

In some lands (like Egypt) the old language and script
was completely replaced by Arabic and in others (like Iran) an
amalgamation took place, i.e., the local language was preserved, but
the script was adopted with some alterations to suit the need of the
language. There are yet other peoples (like Muslims of the Indian
subcontinent) whose Islamic identity is reflected in Urdu, a language
that is a mixture of Hindi and Persian, and the Nasta’liq script.

Then we have the Chinese Muslims who accepted the Arabic
script merely as the script of their religion at first, but gradually
developed from it – based on their own rich artistic tradition – a unique style of Islamic calligraphy known as the ‘Sino-Arabic Style’. This style is an amazing example of a cultural synthesis; it bluntly displays the Chinese aesthetic values, based on a well-rooted calligraphic tradition of China, while the letters and content of such artworks come from a faith born in Arabia. The study of the process of emergence of Sino-Arabic style would displays the strength of both the faith that inspired it, and the greatness of the tradition that absorbed, digested and transformed it, and eventually made it it’s own. It is a perfect example of inter-civilizational dialogue through word and art.

In all instances – when it comes to speaking Arabic or any other non-native language for that matter – the spirit of native cultures may be sensed in the flow of the regional accents and dialects. On the other hand the appearance of the calligraphic styles of the different regions, despite the use of the same characters and scripts, differ.

In this paper it is proposed that the variation in speech styles (accents and dialects) play an important role in the formation of different writing styles, as both (writing and speech, or form and sound) are embodiments of but one abstracted reality: “The Word” or “الكلمة”. This will be discussed in the context of the Silk Road Cultures.

The Silk Road Spirit

The Silk Road:

The Silk Road(s) or Silk Route(s) is a term used for a historical network of ancient land and maritime highways that extended from Rome, in Southern Europe through Arabia, Egypt, Persia (Iran), Central Asia, Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, all the way Chang’an (today’s Xi’an), now an important location of Islamic culture in China. (Figure 1)