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Dialogue of Civilizations and Cultural Fusion along the Silk Routes: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Formation of Sino-Arabic Calligraphy

Abstract & Introductory Remarks

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 and 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 sea 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 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 dialogue of civilizations 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 the 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 variations in speech styles (accents and dialects) play an important role in the formation of various writing styles as both of them (writing and speech, or form and sound) are embodiments of but one abstract reality: “The Word” or "الكلمه". 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)

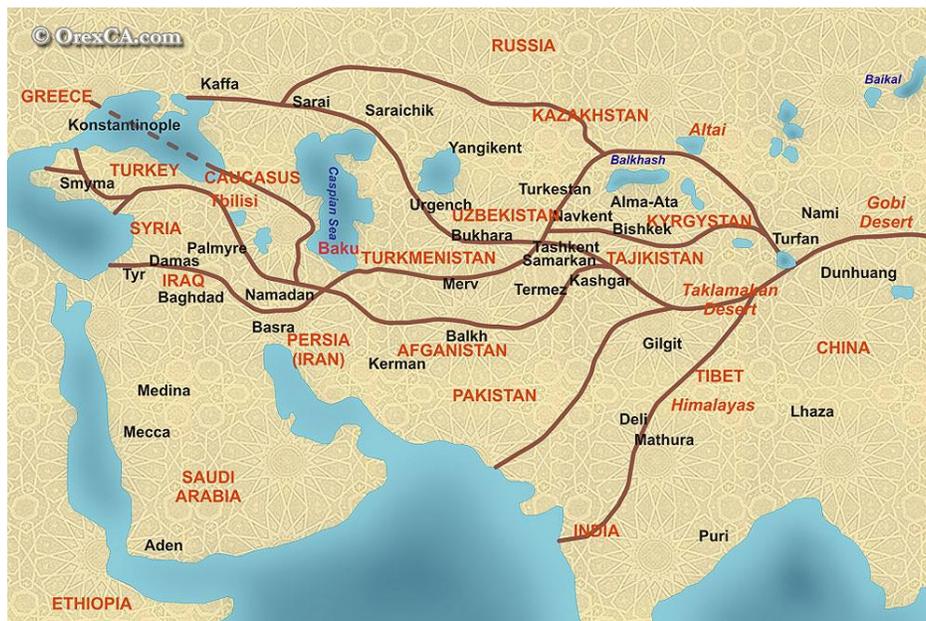
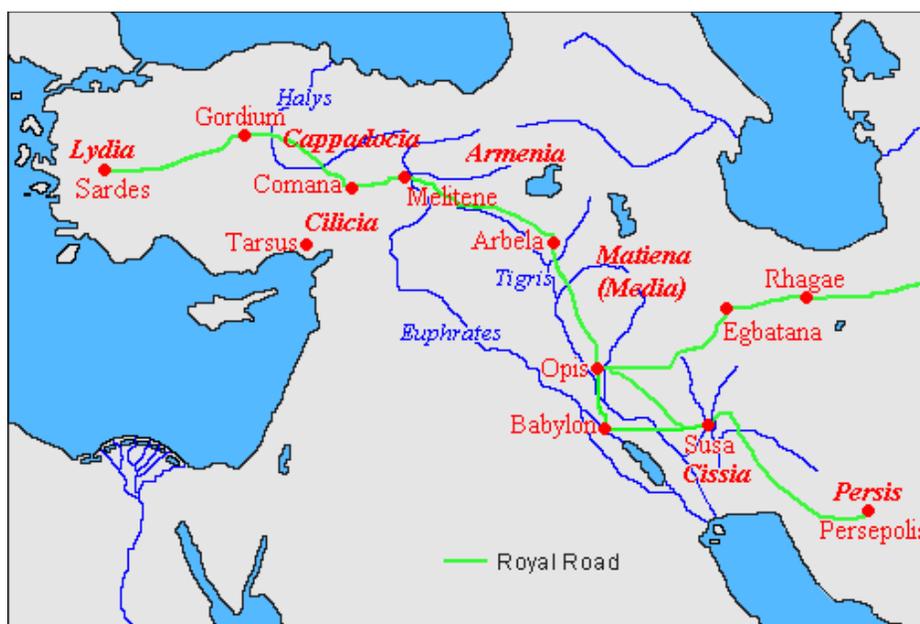


Figure 1: Map of the Silk Routes

Xi'an was in fact the starting point of the Silk Road around 139 BC., long before the advent of Islam. The route ended at Antioch or Constantinople (Istanbul), passing by commercial cities such as Samarkand and Kashgar. Major commodities traded included silk, gold, jade, tea and spices. However, there existed more ancient routes that contributed to the development of the famous Silk Road, with the Persian Royal Road¹, being the most remarkable of all.

Persian Royal Road:

The royal highway (*Rah-e Shahi*) known as the Persian Royal Road was reorganized and rebuilt by the Persian King Darius I of Achaemenid Empire in the 5th Century BC., some three centuries before the formation of the Silk Road. (Figure 2)



¹ The course of the Persian Royal Road has been described by Herodotus (*Histories* v.52-54, viii.98) as follows:

It began in the west in Sardis (on the Aegean coast of Lydia, about 60 miles east of Izmir (in present-day Turkey), traveled east through the middle northern section of Turkey, and passing through the Cilician Gates to Nineveh (the old Assyrian capital and what is the present-day city of Mosul in Iraq), then traveled south to Babylon (present-day Baghdad). From near Babylon, it is believed to have split into two routes into Persia (Iran): one traveling northwest then west through Ecbatana (present-day Hamadan), and the other continuing east through the future Persian capital Susa and then southeast to the ancient royal city of Persepolis in southern Iran.



Figure 2: The Persian Royal Highway

The Persian Royal Road was considered a state of the art construction in the area of highway engineering and, according to Herodotus, the fastest path of communication on earth: mounted couriers could travel 1,677 miles (2,699 km) in seven days; the journey from Susa to Sardis which took ninety days on foot; and that "neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor darkness of night prevents these couriers from completing their designated stages with utmost speed".²

The Maritime Route:

With the expansion of trade, the need for ever growing bulk of commodities – natural as well as manufactured products and artifacts – too grew, and a desperate need for better and faster mode of transportation was felt. Sea routes provided alternative ways of transportation and, in a rather short time ships were in high demand: ships were much less constraining than caravans in terms of capacity, and larger quantities of goods could be traded. (Figure 3)

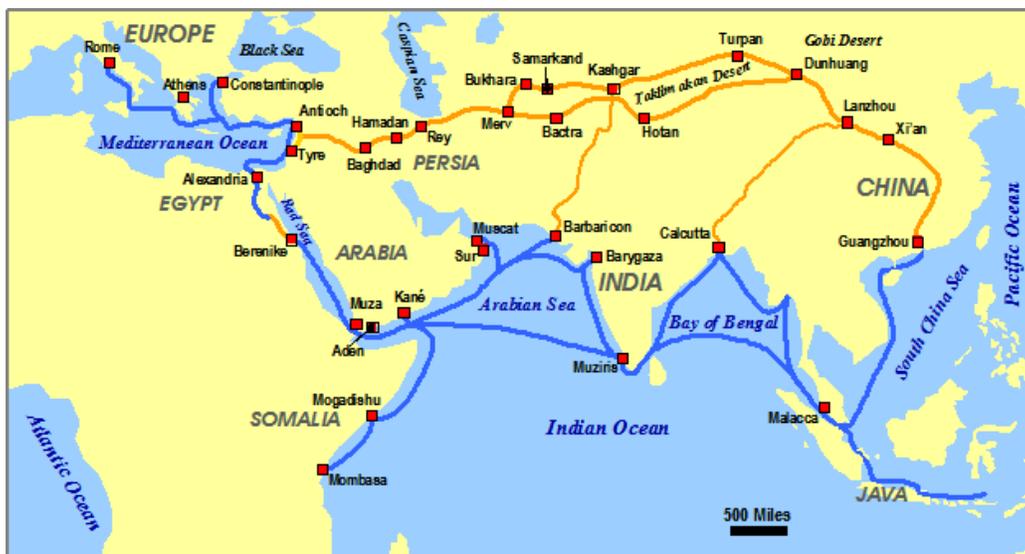


Figure 3: Maritime Spice Routes³

The initial use of the sea route took place during the Roman Era, between the 1st and 6th centuries, when ships were sailing between the Red Sea and India⁴. From the 9th century,

² For a detailed account see: Herodotus, *Histories* v.52-54, viii.98; Also see W. M. Calder, "The Royal Road in Herodotus" *The Classical Review* 39.1/2 (February - March 1925:7-11).

³ Retrieved from <http://asiapacificuniverse.com/pkm/spiceroutes.htm>

⁴ Goods were transhipped at the town of Berenike along the Red Sea and moved by camels inland to the Nile. From that point, river boats moved the goods to Alexandria, from which trade could be undertaken with the



maritime routes controlled by the Arab traders emerged and gradually undermined the importance of the Silk Road. The main maritime route started at Canton (Guangzhou), passed through Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Red Sea, and then reached Alexandria. A significant feeder went to the Spice Islands (Moluccas) in today's Indonesia.⁵

By this time the Silk Road had expanded to a much greater network of both land and sea routes. It even extended farther eastward to Nara in Japan.

The term 'Silk Road' (*seidenstrassen*) was first adopted by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877⁶; the name obviously emphasizes on silk, as one of the most valuable traded. The main direction of trade was from east to west, with spice being yet another commodity of high demand in the west. Western countries took part in these trades with luxury goods made of gold, silver and glass.

Although silk and spice are mostly stressed upon as main items of exchange, and no doubt they were important, but the trade gave way to a yet more important exchange, i.e. the exchange of thought – cultural dialogue. The Silk Road served as a vector for the diffusion of ideas and religions (initially Buddhism and then Islam), enabling civilizations from Europe, the Middle East and Asia to interact. The waves of Islam to various destinations, such as Southeast Asia and East Africa, moved through the same paths that silk and spice did, and gave a deeper meaning to the concept of communication. The first-hand accounts of trade and other voyages by mariners from Southeast Asia to Africa are in Arabic literature, while previous accounts, such as the ones on Solomon's journey, and Pliny's brief descriptions of long sea voyages, draw a somewhat vague picture.⁷

The Muslim traders, who in their dhows moved eastward in search of sources of cinnamon and cassia, carried with them their script, language and faith. The locals, therefore accepted Islam, not as a result the efforts by missionaries – as was, and still is, the main trend of religious conversion to Christianity. In fact the spread of Islam was, in most instances, a byproduct of a natural process of trade that eventually would lead to a cultural fusion.

Roman Empire. For a detailed account see James Innes Miller's *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire, 29 B.C. to A.D. 641*. Oxford, 1969

⁵ <http://people.hofstra.edu/geotrans/eng/ch1en/conc1en/silkroad.html>

⁶ See "Approaches Old and New to the Silk Roads" Vadime Eliseeff in: *The Silk Roads: Highways of Culture and Commerce*. Paris (1998) UNESCO

⁷ The Muslim geographers and historians still record trade activity between Africa and Southeast Asia in aloe wood, tortoise-shell, iron and other products centuries after the Arabs had established themselves on the Tanzanian coast.



Downfall of the Silk Road:

The Silk Road reached its peak during the Mongolian Empire (13th century) when China and Central Asia were controlled by Mongol Khans, which were strong proponent of trade even if they were ruthless conquerors. At the same time relationships between Europe and China were renewed, notably after the voyages of Marco Polo (1271-1292). During the Middle Ages, the Venetians and Genoese controlled the bulk of the Mediterranean trade which connected to the major trading centers of Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria. As European powers developed their maritime technologies from the 15th century, they successfully overthrew the Arab control of this lucrative trade route to replace it by their own. Ships being able to transport commodities faster and cheaper marked the downfall of the land Silk Routes by the 16th century.⁸

Spread of Islam in China & Cultural Fusion

Trade between Arabs and Persians of the Middle East, on the one hand, and the Chinese, on the other, existed long before the advent of Islam. No wonder then, that history of Islam in China began just a few decades after its rise. In 650 AD Chaliph Uthman (the 3rd Islamic chalif) sent the first official Muslim envoy to China. A year later (651 AD) another envoy, headed by Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, arrived in Chang'an (present-day Xi'an) via the overseas route. The spread of Islam started when the traders from Near and Middle East converted to Islam. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), a steady stream of Arab (Ta'shi) and Persian (Po'si) traders arrived in China through the Silk Road and the overseas route through the port of Quanzhou. The ones who stayed in China formed the basis of the Chinese Muslim population and the Hui ethnic group. The Persian immigrants introduced polo, their cuisine, their musical instruments, and their knowledge of medicine to China.

Cultural Fusion:

Muslims continued to flourish in China during the Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644). Nanjing (the capital of the Mings) was a center of Islamic Learning. After the Ming Dynasty however, migration slowed down and the Muslims became increasingly isolated. This was a turning point in the process of cultural exchange and fusion:

So far, in this long period of trade through land and sea routes, China, having been the major producer of silk and certain type of spices, was among the major exporters. Yet, when it came to cultural exchange, it was at the receiving point: The influence of the Muslim traders who brought Islam to China was not confined to a new religion or ideology. They brought with them their own local cultures, food habits, social customs, languages, etc. A major impact on Chinese culture by

⁸ <http://people.hofstra.edu/geotrans/eng/ch1en/conc1en/silkroad.html>



Islam was the introduction of a new script (Arabic). Being the script of the Qur'an, Arabic was inseparable from the faith.

With the migration of Muslims to China waves of cultural exchange changed direction. Many Muslim men who settled in China married Han Chinese women and, in order to blend easier in the social texture, simply took the name of the wife. Other Muslims, who could not find a Chinese surname similar to their own, adopted the Chinese character most similar to their own - Mo (馬) for Muhammad, Mai for Mustafa, Mu for Masoud, Ha for Hasan, Hu for Hussain and Sa'I for Said and so on.¹ As a result the Muslims became "outwardly indistinguishable" from the Chinese.⁹ In addition to names, Muslim customs of dress and food also underwent a synthesis with Chinese culture. The Islamic modes of dress and dietary rules were maintained within a Chinese cultural framework. In time, the immigrant Muslims began to speak local dialects and to read in Chinese.

The blend of spoken languages eventually led to the blend of writing styles and, as a result, a new form of script emerged that came to be known as Sino-Arabic. This new script, according to my theory, displays a tight relation between sound and shape in the domain of language. The elaboration of the theory follows:

From Sound (Speech) to Shape (Script)

As a painter and calligrapher I constantly deal with 'form' both from theoretical aspect and its practice. Once, quite a while ago, in the process of teaching aesthetics of calligraphy, I started my class by this statement: "Writing is the visual form of speaking". This short sentence kept me occupied for a very long time and eventually developed into an interesting theory that I labeled as "The theory of Correlation between Writing Styles and Speech styles in Islamic cultures"¹⁰. My theory began formation in India during late 1980s and early 1990s and was later on developed in the course of my several journeys along the Silk Roads, with the latest ones to China and Japan in 2003 and 2004 respectively.

The diverse culture of the Silk Route countries fascinated me and had a deep impact in the formation of the said theory; this is despite the fact that the subject of my research was confined

⁹ Israeli, Raphael *Islam in China*, 2002, Lexington Books, P. 292

¹⁰ I have discussed the theory with special reference to *Nasta'liq* style of calligraphy in Iran and the Indo-Pak Subcontinent in *Golestan-e Honar* (biannual on the History of Iranian Art and Architecture) No. 2, Autumn-Winter 2005, pp. 116-125



to the study of Islamic calligraphy along the Silk Route.¹¹ Even though the writing styles that I covered as a part of my research were all branches of Islamic, or rather Arabic script, but their aesthetic nuances proved to be as diverse and colorful as the clothing, food, features, gestures and languages of the lands in which they are practiced. In each land however, I could sense a harmonizing factor that related and connected the different aspects of that specific culture, hence making them parts on a single cultural unit, the same way the limbs of a body carry an identity that is unique to that body. A culture is, and acts like, a living body; as a self protection mechanism it reacts to the entities that are foreign to it. Anything alien to the body of a culture is detected as a potential enemy and is resisted to. However, when the outsider undergoes transformation and tunes itself with the existing rhythm (the heartbeat) of the host culture, it will be granted a ‘permanent resident’ status that allows it to stay and live in harmony with the other components of the society. Languages and scripts are no exception to this rule; they project this rhythm in the way people talk (the embodiment of words in sound) or the way they write (the embodiment of words in script).

In this dissertation I have propounded the theory of correlation between the writing styles (calligraphy) and speech-style (languages and dialects). Having been involved with the subject for the past two decades, I am persuaded that one of the important factors affecting the writing-style and calligraphic nuances in a particular society is the style of speech – the accents and dialects that have their roots in the local language of the region.

Speech is organically integrated with language, making use of internal physiological movements which transmit energy transitorily through air. Writing makes use of the external movements which directly or indirectly produce durable modifications to external objects.¹² John Mountford argues that these modifications of the outer world have no organic relation to the language, only a relation of convention; as their resources and are very different from those of speech.¹³ This argument may be accepted for the type of languages and writing-systems that were developed as “*Languages of Information*”- languages that are carriers of data in a man-to-man or mass communication level; the realm of such languages is the natural domain of knowledge and they therefore operate, metaphorically speaking, in a horizontal plane.

On the other hand however, we have “*Languages of Revelation*”, languages that are carriers of Divine wisdom and comprise commands in a vertical up-down direction. In the languages that are associated with the body of religion (like Arabic and Islam) there are profound historical association between language and script. *Languages of Revelation* constitute the “Words” that

¹¹ In 1995 I received the Hirayama Fellowship Award from UNESCO to undertake a research on “The Evolution of Islamic Calligraphy along the Silk Road”, a theme that has since kept my mind occupied.

¹² Mountford, John. ‘Language and Writing-systems’, in *An Encyclopedia of Language*, edited by N. E. Collinge, 1990, London, Routledge, p.705

¹³ Ibid



are issued from a sacred source and are therefore considered sacred; sacredness is a quality that transcends the material domain of religion and associates itself with the divine. Its function is not of a descriptive nature, but of a transforming one. “*Languages of Information*” and “*Languages of Revelation*” are therefore essentially different, as their sources i.e. environment of application, mode of operation, purpose of communication and the realm they propose to present are totally unlike. Script (books, inscriptions, etc.) is the physical body of a language and must therefore possess some essential attributes of the language it presents. This physical body, in case of sacred texts must be treated with respect and handled only in a state of prescribed purity: “That this is indeed a Qur’an most honourable, in a Book well-guarded, which none shall touch but those who are clean” (Qur’an 56:77, 78, 79).

Religions throughout the world have always been as much connected to the written text as they are to the vocal body (recitation, chanting, etc.). In fact sound (supported by body gestures in direct visible contacts) for a very long period of time constituted the only mode of communication; it existed long before writing. Sounds (speaking) and shapes (writing) are but mediums through which “words” manifest. “Word” is by essence abstract, intangible and concealed from the senses; yet it is, according to a religious point of view, the source from which all that has manifested or shall manifest emanate: “*At the beginning there was the Word*”. So the hierarchy starts on the top with “The Word” (الكلمة), which descends to “sound” and eventually takes the form of writing or “script”.

There are of course a great many factors, namely existing traditions and aesthetic sensibilities, foreign influences and even climatic conditions that have marked their impressions on the visual body of languages (scripts, characters and various styles) in the course of their evolution and are each responsible in the formation of the present writing systems; among them all sound-words occupies a distinct status.

Study of regional accents must receive proper attention in the field of cultural studies. Accents carry with them a great deal of data in a concealed codified manner, something that is usually overlooked or even ignored totally.

Chinese Islamic Calligraphy

It is believed that during the Yan and Song dynasties (12th-16th centuries) Islam was expanding and growing vastly in China. Since then Islam became officially recognized by different imperial authorities at different Chinese dynasties. The majority of the Muslims in China are located in the Xinjiang province in west China. They speak in Turkic languages and have close cultural ties with the western republics of the former Soviet Union. Among the languages used by the Muslim minority in China, Uighur and Kazak languages are distinct. Recognized as one of the official



languages they are written in Arabic- alphabet.¹⁴ A rich literature of poetry and writings on Buddhist and Nestorian teachings exists in the old Uighur script, which was probably Semitic in origin. An Arabic script replaced it in the thirteenth century when the Uyghur converted to Islam.

Calligraphy has a distinct place in Chinese culture; it is regarded as a supreme artistic achievement, and enjoys a prestige surpassed by no other art. The great calligraphers of each dynasty, therefore, set the standard of artistic perfection of their epoch.¹⁵

A fundamental trend that relates the Chinese and Islamic artistic traditions is their highest regard for calligraphy. In western cultures painting and sculpture are considered most prominent while other forms of arts are regarded as ‘minor arts’. In China, however, calligraphy and painting are usually mentioned together, with calligraphy having the upper hand. Arabic calligraphy on the other hand, due to its association with the divine words of the holy Qur’an, occupies the highest status among all other forms of art in the entire Muslim world. Writing, according to the Qur’anic teachings has a divine origin. The auspicious marriage of the two rich calligraphic cultures of China and Islam gave birth to a unique form of calligraphic art that displays, in its own beautiful way, a civilizational dialogue. This beautiful strange-looking child grew up into a creative and attractive art; it was named Sino-Arabic calligraphy.

Sino-Arabic Script

Among all Muslims who have developed an artistic tradition of Islamic calligraphy, the Chinese case is most unique. This uniqueness has its root in the nature of the Chinese language and its writing system. As it is well known, written Chinese is not an alphabetic language, but a script of ideograms. It means they use characters, not letters as we do in Islamic, or even in Western languages. The Chinese characters stand for things or ideas, and so, unlike groups of letters – that each represent a sound in most languages we know, Chinese characters cannot and need never be sounded.¹⁶

In Chinese, every character is a syllable. It seems that Chinese language originally was monosyllabic; therefore their writing system reflects the monosyllabic stage. This means that, at least in general, there was a symbol constructed for every word. Because of this, the number of elements in the script is not based on the number of sounds but on the number of words in the

¹⁴ For a detailed account of the Muslim minorities see: Dillon Michael’s *China’s Muslim Community Migration, Settlements and Sects*, Curzon press, UK, 1999.

¹⁵ For an elaborate account see Deng Fuxing, Huang Lan, *Chinese Fine Arts*, Culture Publishing House, Beijing 1999

¹⁶ In China there are many languages and dialects, yet they use a single writing system. People who speak Hokkien, Hakka, or Cantonese for example, cannot communicate through speaking but they can easily do so through reading a text written in Chinese characters.



language¹⁷. Hence it is “word” (a unit that represents an object or idea) that constitutes the prime element of the Chinese writing, not “letter” (a unit that represents an individual sound). A comparative example might fall useful. In Arabic script for instance, the sound ‘*m*’ is always associated with the form of letter ‘*meem*’, so no matter in how many words, or how many times in a single word, the ‘*m*’ sound appears it will always be visualized in the shape of ‘*meem*’. In Chinese writing on the other hand such form-sound link does not exist. It means for instance, that you can have many words all with the ‘*m*’ sound in them without the slightest resemblance in their written form. This example explains how basic the differences between the two languages are, and it does not end here.

‘Script direction’ is yet another major difference; Arabic script is written horizontally from right to left while Chinese calligraphy traditionally has a vertical structure with an up-down direction. This is why most Chinese pieces of calligraphy follow a vertical composition. A third difference is related to the writing tools: the traditional tool for Islamic calligraphy is a reed pen while in the Chinese case it is a brush.

Now let us have a brief look at Chinese Islamic calligraphy and find out how and to what extent the differences referred to earlier (the word-sound concept, writing directions, and the tools) have affected the appearance of the said art.

The Islamic calligraphic art of China may be divided into four major categories, a) Qur’anic manuscripts, b) monumental calligraphy of mosques, c) writings on objects and artifacts, and d) scrolls and individual calligraphic pieces.

Our main focus in this paper is the Qur’anic manuscripts and the calligraphic scrolls as they are more basic as far as the theme of our research is concerned.

In scribing Qur’anic manuscripts the Chinese calligraphers acted with quite a conservative approach. After all, they were copying the Divine words that were revealed and recorded originally in a foreign language, something that did not leave much space for self expression and artistic experimentation. Naturally they followed the footsteps of the Middle Eastern masters in almost every respect: used reed pens, adopted the already established styles of writings associated with the Qur’an (Naskh, Thulth, Muhaqqaq, Riq’a’ and the like) and used formats very similar to the existing examples. In other words in the copying of Qur’anic manuscripts, the whole aesthetic quality was an imported one. This foreign quality exposed itself in the rigid handling of the reed pen, somewhat rough execution of letters, and as a result not a so-refined flow of the script. On the other hand the vivid use of colors applied freely with brush, the local

¹⁷ <http://www.crystalinks.com/chineselang.html>



motifs (lotus, typical Chinese clouds, etc.) brings the pages to life and adds an original quality to the otherwise imitative aspect of the pieces. (See Figures 4 & 5)

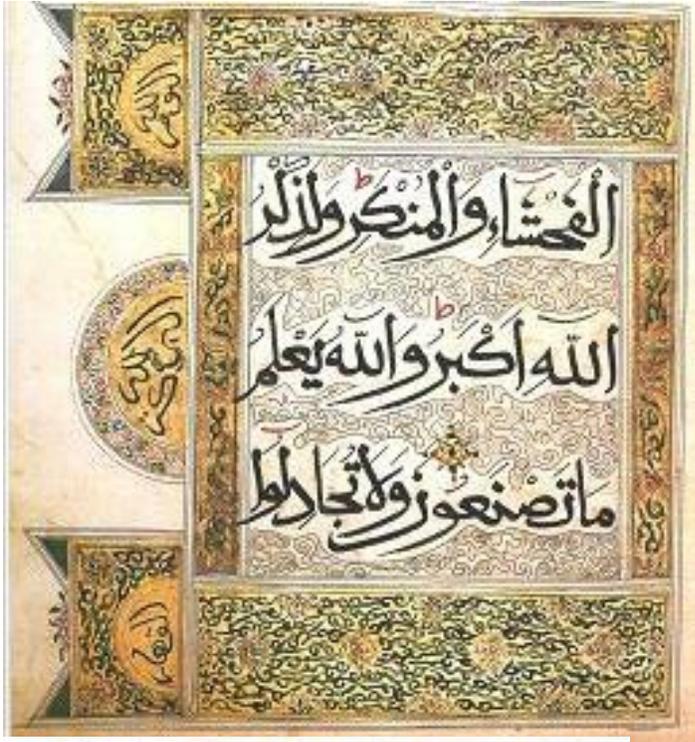
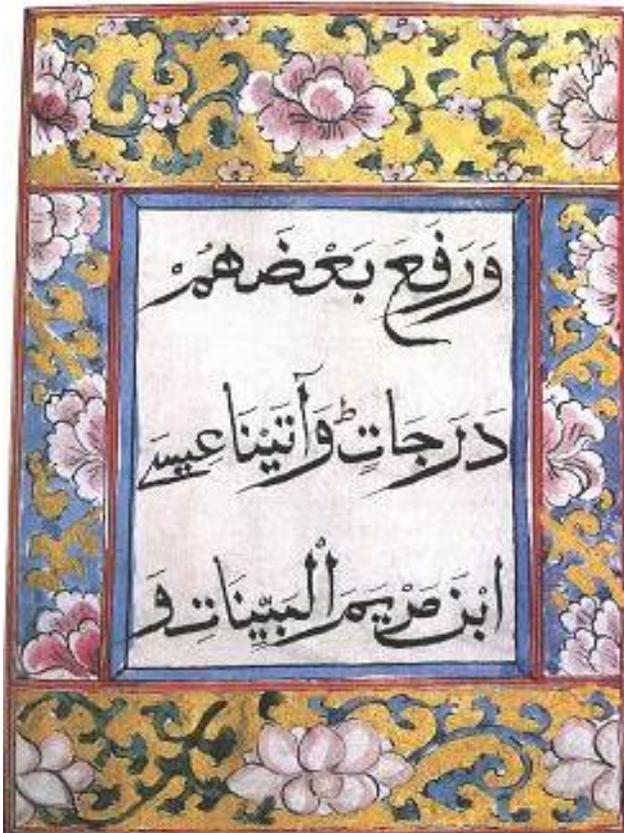


Figure 4:
Page of a Qur'an
manuscript (written in
30 separate booklets for
each individual *judz*) in
Sino-Arabic script with
borders of illuminated
cloud scrolls and lotus
motifs
China. c. 17th century
CE
27cm x 19.5cm
Collection of the
Islamic Arts Museum
Malaysia



This originality and expressive quality is further emphasized upon when calligraphic writing is used in a decorative manner on the artifacts. (Figure 6) Here the Chinese aesthetic quality is fully present: this may be observed in the shape of the object, the color scheme and the other decorative elements on it, and

Figure 5:
Page from a *Judz* of Qur'an in
Sino-Arabic script with typical
Chinese floral borders of peony
and lotus motifs
China. 1142 AH / 1730 CE
28cm x 19.5cm
Collection of the Islamic Arts
Museum Malaysia



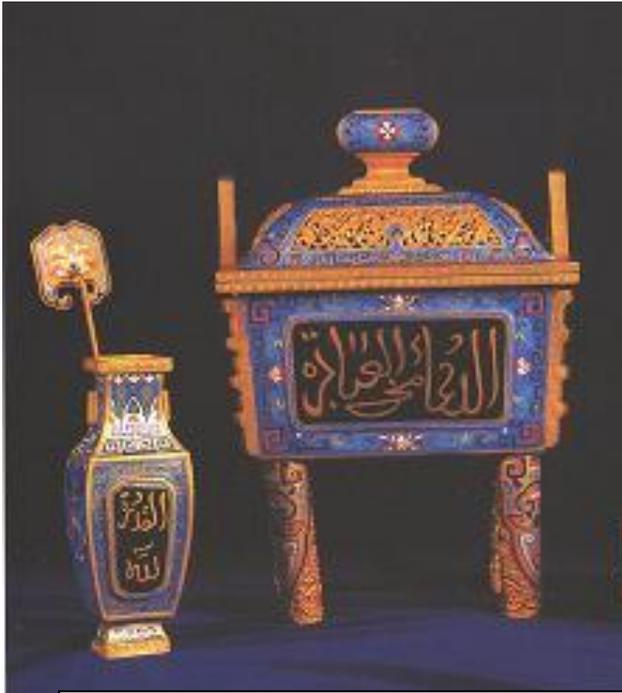


Figure 6:
Incense burner set, ornamented with geometric and floral designs, and decorative Islamic calligraphy in Chinese style. The inscription on the incense burner in the centre read '*al-Du'a Mukn al-I'badah*' (prayer is the kernel of worship), while the one on the vase on the left may be read as '*al-Qudratu li-Allah*' (all power belongs to Allah)
China. c. 19th century CE
Incense burner: 31.5cm x 22cm x 16cm
Vase: 26.5cm x 7cm, Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

Figure 7:
Calligraphic scroll in stylized Chinese Islamic script
It begins with *bism-Allah al- Rahman al-Rahim* at the top of the scroll and *ya-Mustafa* in the centre of the scroll in a floral motif. This is followed by *la Ilaha ill-Allah* and *Muhammad Rasul-Allah* in a free handwriting. The Chinese characters at the bottom refer to advice on manners and courtesy.

However the best examples that display Chinese rhythm in the form of Islamic calligraphy are the calligraphic scrolls (Figures 7, 8 and 9). They go to such extremes in their indigenous expressive qualities that in many cases establishing any relation between them and the Islamic writing-system appear impossible, let alone accepting them as examples of Islamic calligraphy.



This again has its roots in the local language and the speech styles connected to it. The *'word-unit'* rule not only governs Chinese writing but is also apparent in its speech styles.

In hearing a Chinese dialogue for example one will hardly be able to make a clear distinction between the sounds *'r'* and *'l'* or say between *'n'* and *'g'*. What is mostly heard is an abundance of long and short vowels with little stress on consonants, and among the consonants too the border line is not so clear. This blurred boundary between individual sounds is even sensed when a foreign language is spoken by a Chinese; something generally known as a "Chinese accent". This speech style is in perfect harmony with the writing system that represents it, a system in which the characters are not based on a phonetic but a semantic system, that is, their primary function is to represent not sound but meaning. In other words, as also explained earlier, *'word'* is approached at in its totality as a single unit, not as a compound entity comprised of individual phonetic elements.

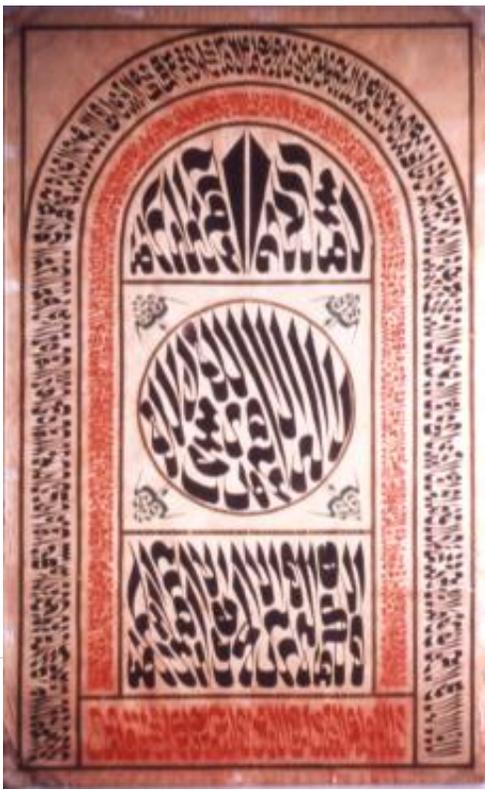


Figure 8:
Calligraphic scroll in stylized Chinese
Islamic script, Collection of the Islamic
Arts Museum Malaysia



In the style of writing of the Chinese scrolls, the short and long wavy strokes remind us of the short and long vowels of the spoken language while the stress on unity of the ‘word’ is clearly a prominent factor. The flexible brush movements create a variety of tones and textures that are totally distinct from the precise and definite effects produced by the traditional Islamic bamboo reed, and the composition of the words follows the Chinese rhythm of speaking/writing flow – swift, spontaneous and ambiguous. The vertical scroll format stresses further the Chinese identity of the works and creates a familiar background for the forms to rest in. As a result of all the above factors we have a kind of art that is totally new, beyond the established visual tradition of Islamic Art, something Islamic in content but completely Chinese in character.

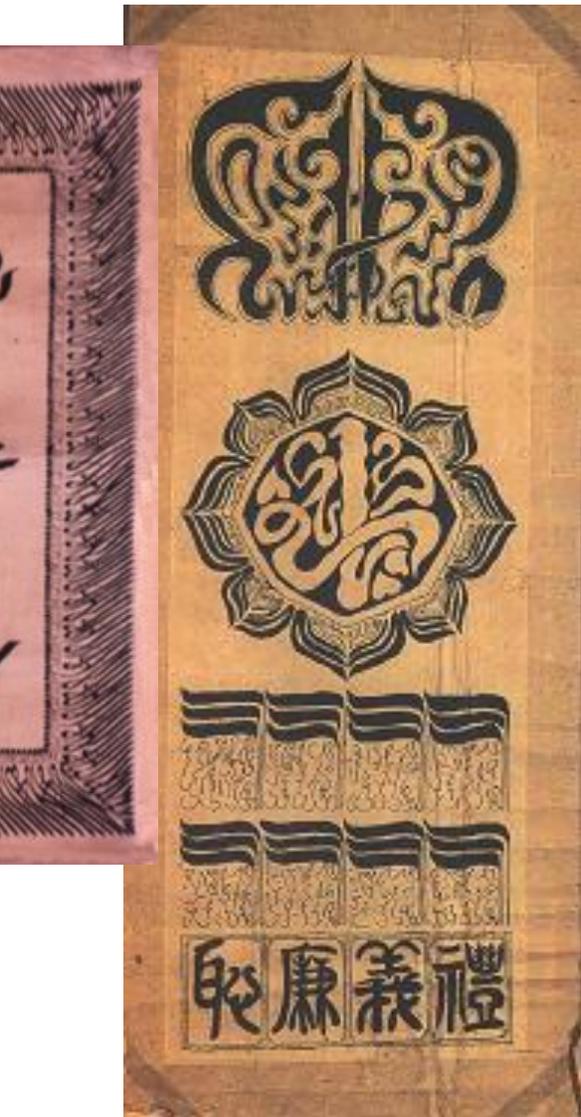


Figure 9:
Calligraphic scroll, executed in stylized Sino-Arabic style.
In the centre appears words from the Qur’anic verse 3:19 designed into 3 squares in a somewhat geometric format; it reads from down to up: (Inna al-din) (‘Inda-allah) (al-Islam)
Collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia

Conclusion

“Word” is the spirit of language, and language is expressed in two main ways: vocal and visual, with the vocal preceding the visual (speaking before writing). In the “*Language of Revelation*” there exists a tight connection between the vocal



and the visual embodiment of the “Word”. In the *“Language of Information”*, on the other hand, the connection between the vocal and visual aspects is much weaker and, especially with the expansion of technology, is gradually diminishing.

Several factors influence the spoken languages; historical, racial, climatic and a number of other factors mould the variety of speech nuances (accents) that reflect the inner rhythm of a culture. The same factors leave their marks on the body of scripts and give rise to a variety of writing styles that also reflect the inner rhythm of a culture from which they emanate.

Consequently, the speech and writing styles, especially in traditional social textures, share the same rhythm. Study of regional accents must receive proper attention in the field of cultural studies. Accents carry with them a great deal of data in a concealed codified manner, something that is usually overlooked or even totally ignored. An interdisciplinary study of the subject can help unveil the fact.

