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## Original Research Article

# A Study of the Art of Chinese Quranography from the Sixteenth to the End of the Eighteenth Century

Sahar Anvari\*

Master student in the history of art in the Islamic world, College of Fine Arts, University of Tehran.

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### Abstract

Calligraphy has always been one of the top Islamic arts. This meaning comes from the readability and the beautiful writing of Quran verses such as the divine word and the miracle of Islam religion, and this art can be referred to as a special art of the Islamic world. Like any other arts, which found a way to other areas, when Islam started being spread and combined with indigenous elements and their ancient arts, Islamic calligraphy entered different disciplines (despite the lack of change in the Arabic alphabet) then gained a new shape and different forms. For example, different types of Kufic script (Kufic script was one of the earliest scripts of the Arabic alphabet), were named based on local geographies, such as Maddani Kufic script, Makki Kufic, Eastern Kufic, Western Kufic, etc. As a country with a non-Islamic context and a Buddhist religious background, China's Islamic calligraphy has undergone changes in combination with the country's ancient culture and art and the current religion, presenting different graphic forms, which is called Sini calligraphy. It is different from the usual calligraphy in the Islamic world. Sini calligraphy appears on various themes such as the Quran, mosque inscriptions, functional objects, and tombstones. This study uses descriptive analysis to analyze the calligraphy and decorations used in the Chinese Quran as the main manifestation of Sini calligraphy, that is, the word of God, to answer the following question: What is the characteristic form of calligraphy in the Sino- Arabic Qurans? What is the relationship between the Quranic verses in the Sino-Arabic Quran and the writing style? What are the elements of the decoration and lighting of the pages of the Sino-Arabic Quran? What is the origin of the Sini calligraphy that is used in the Sino-Arabic Quran? The results show that the calligraphy of Sino-Arabic Qurans has found a unique form by combining Arabic script with brush strokes and twists and beats of songs in Chinese calligraphy. In the Quranic illumination and the decoration of the pages, common symbols in Buddhism, ancient motifs as well as objects used in Chinese culture and art, bright colors and flowers and plants and symbols of this land, have been used, as well as the calligraphy used in Chinese Qurans rooted in Muhhaqiq script.

**Keywords:** *Islamic calligraphy, Sini calligraphy, Sino-Arabic calligraphy, illumination, Islamic art.*

### Introduction

In the first verse of Surah Qalam, God says: "Nun,

By the Pen, and by the (Record) which (men) write" and swears by the pen and

\* sahar.anvaari@ut.ac.ir, +989123005369

what it writes. Among the various arts, calligraphy can be considered the most important manifestation and elements of Islamic spread, as the Holy Qur'an itself, Prophet Mohammad, and Imam Ali (pub) have spoken many times about the importance and value of beautiful writing of the divine word. The necessity and significance of calligraphy began with the written and readable writing of the divine word as a miracle of Islam and spread to other areas of Muslim culture and art. Surviving works of calligraphy include a wide range of inscriptions, Qurans, Mus'hafs, and religious, scientific, and literary texts of government documents. On the other hand, cultural diversity and geographical diversity give rise to various calligraphy styles throughout the Islamic lands. Despite the fixed and definite letters of the Arabic alphabet, the calligraphy of each region has its own form and this has led to a variety of fonts and different styles in the art of Islamic calligraphy (Kavousi, et al., 1912, 20). Just as the Kufi script spread to different countries when the Quran was written and found special forms in various regions such as East Kufi and West Kufi with the rise of Islam, Arabic scripts merged with local and ancient scripts. Together. The art of this country. It was localized in some way, creating a new style called Sini (Arabic-Chinese) calligraphy. In a country with an Islamic background, this kind of calligraphy has the most prominent appearance and application as a revelation word in Quran writing and as an identity element of Muslim places of worship in mosque inscriptions. On the one hand, the art of Chinese Islamic calligraphy is the common ground between my country's Islamic art and other countries in the Islamic world.

On the other hand, due to the particularity of calligraphy, it is more common in Islamic countries. Other Arabic calligraphy, so it is doubly important. Of course, the importance of calligraphy in Chinese culture cannot be ignored. This has also aroused the special attention of domestic artists and experts to calligraphy and Islamic calligraphy. The Qur'an

which is written in China, in addition to its unique calligraphy, also uses Chinese native and dominant illumination art, which has nothing to do with the Islamic aspect. This distinguishes it from other Qurans. This research aims to study calligraphy, page layout, and illumination characteristics of the Quran by examining the Chinese written Quran and the factors that influence the difference between the Chinese Quran and the common Quran in the Islamic world.

### **Methodology**

This article discusses the description and analysis methods of the Chinese Quran writing art, including calligraphy, illumination, and layout decoration; in this way, the spelling and calligraphy of the letters and words of the Quran can be checked, as well as the attributes and types of elements used to decorate and gilded the pages of the Quran, And their symbolic meaning and origin. The method of collecting information and data is carried out by using the Internet and library resources. The population of this study includes 12 manuscripts of the Quran written in China from the 16th to the late 18th century AD.

### **Research background**

There is no research on the graphics, calligraphy, and painting art of the Quran in the form of books, essays, and scientific articles, but there is very little research on Chinese Islamic art in Persian and English. In the article entitled "Islamic Chinese Art: Collection of Islamic Chinese Calligraphy Works", the author introduced Chinese Islamic works including calligraphy, such as inscriptions and practical objects, and recognized the uniqueness of Chinese Islamic calligraphy Mohammad AlManaii, 2021 In the research titled "The Direct Maritime Trade between Ancient Islamic Iraq and the Tang Dynasty: From Trade to the Spread of Ideas", the researchers historically dealt with the maritime relationship between Iraq and China from the 7th century to the

10th century AD. He also studied the trade situation between the two countries and their mutual relations. The results showed that most Iraqi merchants were quite familiar with Chinese and conversation, and later the Chinese also learned Arabic, which led to technical and scientific exchanges in Iraq after China, especially pharmaceuticals and alchemy (George, 2015). In the article “A Comparative Study of the Use of Colors in Islamic Architecture in China and Iran”, the author used historical analysis to compare the color changes between Chinese mosques and Iranian mosques and found that some Chinese mosques and Iranian mosques have similar color changes. The architecture of Iranian mosques and some other mosques is inspired by Chinese temples. Warm and light colors are also used in the construction of Chinese mosques (Soleimani & Ismaili, 2017).

An article entitled “Sino- Arabic” Manuscripts and Architectural Inscriptions of the Great Mosque of Xian” discussed the description method of using calligraphy in the construction of the Xian Mosque. It is considered that this kind of calligraphy is unique in form. It served as a bridge between Muslims and non-Muslims in China. Finally, it is recommended that relevant Chinese organizations step in to protect this precious cultural and artistic heritage (Dilmi, 2014). In the article “The Development of Islamic Art and Architecture, the Gift of the Silk Road”, the author explores the role of the Silk Road in conveying the culture and art of different countries from a historical perspective, including Islamic art and the role of Muslim merchants in products transition. The conclusion is that this road, due to its proximity to different countries, provides many opportunities for measures that can be taken to achieve greater cultural and artistic exchanges in future plans (Heshmati pour, 2013). Due to the importance of calligraphy in Muslim’s culture and the art of Quranography with the subject of sacred words and Islam’s miracles which has been ignored in the

study of geographical regions in China, Therefore, this research aims to study the characteristics of Quran writing art and calligraphy, as well as the decoration and illumination of distinctive Qurans in non-Muslim contexts by studying and testing some Qurans written in this country.

### **History of Islam in China**

Except for the native Chinese religions of Taoism and Buddhism, other religions have entered and spread this land. As a country with a Buddhist and Taoist background, China has a large number of ethnic minorities of various religions, one of which is Muslim. The existence of Muslims in China can be traced back to the first century of Islam and the role of the Silk Road. Just as this road brought Buddhism in India, Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism in Iran, and Christianity in the West to China. Islam entered China by sea. Unlike other countries and ethnic minorities who converted to Islam through war and swords, the earliest Muslims in China were merchants and travelers in port cities that formed communities in southern, southeastern, and eastern China along the Silk Road. The Tang government, which ruled China at the time of the rise of Islam, particularly promoted the trade between Iranians and Muslim Arabs and allowed them to buy land and build port cities (Imam, 2018, 2329). In addition to merchants who voluntarily or involuntarily spread Islamic culture to the Far East, some ambassadors and diplomats entered China during the Ottoman Empire, the third Caliph, and Xian to propagate and spread Islam as the capital of the Tang Dynasty. They also settled in the first town along the Silk Road with merchants along the highway and gathered a Muslim community. During the Tang Dynasty, most traders were fluent in Chinese, sometimes even more fluent, and were able to communicate with Chinese agents and artists (George, 2015, 37). In addition to Muslim merchants, a group of soldiers during the reign of Mansur, the Abbasid caliph, and in 757, at the

request of the Chinese government, helped suppress an uprising in northwest China, and the empire allowed them to live and even marry Chinese girls. Eventually, the Mongols conquered China at the beginning of the 13th century with the help of Turkish and Uyghur Muslims, and thus the country's Muslim communities spread (Imam, 2018, 4538). Muslims in China began to appear as merchants and soldiers; they were not a burden to the country, but important participants in social, political, and economic affairs. The largest number of Muslim immigrants to China was in the post-Mongol period. After these people conquered China and the beginning of the Yuan Dynasty, the Mongols summoned Turkish Muslims to their empire because they did not trust China's Muslim groups. They received positions and were hired as government officials. About half of the Chinese Muslims are Hui (Khoi), they speak Chinese and the other half are of Uyghur and Turkish descent who speak Turkish (Ping, 1994, 24). However, all Muslim immigrants learned the Chinese language, used the Chinese calendar and married indigenous peoples, and were part of the culture and religion of the country (George, 2015, 36). Of course, the acceptance of Islam and its spread were related to the policies of the Chinese king at that time. As long as the new religion did not endanger their power and monarchy, they allowed their followers to spread to the extent that between 1529 and 1597, the people of Mecca came to China to teach the Quran and teach them in these mosques (Ping, 1994, 13- 17).

The presence of these Muslim groups highlighted the necessity of places for worshipping and saying prayers and such a need led to the construction of mosques, as well as the receipt of special amenities and privileges from the empire. As a result, more mosques were built and Muslims' sacred architecture started emerging in a non-Islamic context. Like any religion, when Islam entered any country, the target civilization started to adapt itself to the new culture and art and found a way to match with the present

culture and local conditions then got mixed with pre-existing local elements and gave them a new color. In China, the architecture was combined with old and indigenous Chinese art and culture, making most of the Chinese mosques like pagodas and temples common in this civilization, and with the same design, color and shape and their unmistakable feature of the temples of other religions are elements of Arab calligraphy and inscriptions, and this has made the largest part of Islamic architecture and, above all, the mosques of this country except the ordinary mosques in the Islamic world and have their own style. Although the walls, entrances, and altars of these mosques are decorated with Quranic verses in the form of calligraphy and inscriptions. They also have similarities with the common mosques in Islamic countries, but this similarity is rare in other forms of architecture. It is worth noting that although the Islamic calligraphy art in Chinese civilization despite using Arabic letters, inscriptions, and other objects uses a different form of common Arabic calligraphy in different regions of the Islamic empire that is called Sino-Arabic.

### **Islamic Calligraphy in China**

Because of the importance of calligraphy in the Islamic world and traditional Chinese art, it goes without saying that Islamic calligraphy plays an important role in various art forms in Chinese Muslim society. The reminiscence of this kind of art in the centuries of long-term isolation and separation between Chinese Muslims and other Islamic countries has shown the power and strength of the Muslim religious traditions of the country, and also demonstrated the important role of writing in Islamic countries traditions. (Armijo, 2015, 6) The Hui nationality is the main Chinese-speaking Muslim community in China and has developed the style of Sini calligraphy. Of course, the art of Islamic calligraphy in China has always been challenging, because Arabic and Chinese letters are very different,

and Chinese is different from concrete letters. It is used pictorial language to convey meaning, but Arabic is clear and expressive (Mohammad Al-Mannai, 2021,2). The importance of Islamic calligraphy in China is that “Mi Guang Jiang” (Haji Nureddin), the most prominent calligrapher of Chinese Islamic calligraphy, founded the “House of Chinese Calligraphy Art” in Zheng Xian to promote and protect calligraphy. In addition to collecting surviving examples of Chinese calligraphy in the country’s history, also teaches calligraphy and collaborates with museums and universities around the world to conduct further research (Han, 2018, 2).

### The art of calligraphy on functional objects in China

The word Sini (Arabic word for Chinese) covers a wide range of Islamic-Chinese art forms such as inscriptions, calligraphy scrolls, wood carvings, various earthenware and porcelain products, bronze altars, etc. With the emergence of Ming period and earlier the Ching Dynasty (1444-1912), Muslims began to find and access China and the arts. Small and solid bronze fire altars with Islamic motifs played the greatest role in the destruction of the Ching period in China (Armijo, 2015, 4); (Fig. 1).

### The Art of Calligraphy in Chinese Mosques

One of the most popular examples of Islamic calligraphy surviving in China can be seen in the tombstone inscriptions of Muslim merchants who died in China and were buried there (Fig. 2). As in many parts of the Muslim world, carved coffins of rulers and religious figures include exquisite examples of calligraphy (Shimel, 2012, 15). Some Chinese Muslim communities also used Islamic calligraphy on coffins and palankeens (Fig. 3 A).

### The Art of Calligraphy in Chinese Houses

One of the manifestations of Sini calligraphy in China is related to residential houses in this country. Hui families, especially those living in the

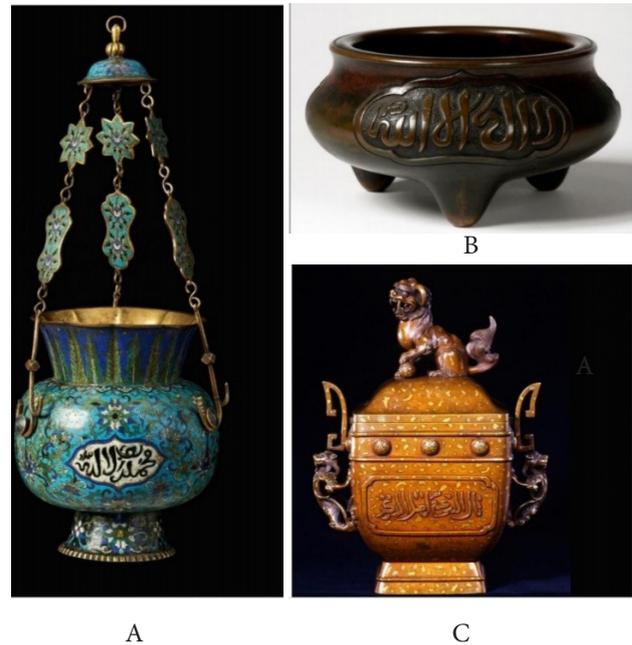


Fig. 1. A: Mosque lights. B: Metal bronze incense burner. C: bronze object. Source: www.davidmus.dk.



Fig. 2. A: Inscription on the entrance of Companion Mosque, B: Inscription of Yunnan Mosque and C: Calligraphy of Chinese Muslim tombstones. Source: Armijo, 2015, 2-4.

countryside, dedicate one of their living room walls to Islamic decoration and calligraphy, often done by local artists (Armijo, 2015, 5); Muslims, because of their religious beliefs, have always preferred the decorative Quranic verses on the walls of their homes over other forms of art (Fig. 3 B).

### The Qurans written in China

The Chinese Qurans are written in Chinese- Arabic or Sini script, which is essentially a combination of Arabic script with brushstrokes and rhythms in the style of Chinese painting and calligraphy. The script used to write the Chinese Qurans closely resembles the Muhhaqiq script. The Muhhaqiq script was the first script that Ibn Muqalla defined geometrically and systematically (Illumination and decoration in Chinese Qurans, 2017). This script is considered to be the father of Arabic writing and is very simple although it is great and glorious, the size of its letters is large and each of these letters has a single and continuous shape and its letters never intertwine, so the advantage of the Muhhaqiq script is its readability. The ratio between circles and lines in this script is 1.5 to 4.5, and the area of the letters is larger than its circumference. The circles of Nuun and similar letters have a small circumference. The first and last circles of the letters Saad, Zaad, etc. are wide, the circle of Ayn, Faa, Qaaf, Waaw, Miim, Ha, and La is always open in all situations. Alif and Kaaf are separated, and Laam at the beginning of the word is separated, Raa, Waaw, and Miim accompanied by the release of calligraphy pen while writing. The pen moves slowly in this script and the pen pressure is the same throughout the writing and there is no change in its thickness and size, but at the same time the movement of the letters is not smooth and but here the movement of the letters is not fluent and there is a feeling of inflexibility (Charei & Pourmand, 2016, 10-13); (Fig. 4). Almost all of these features can be seen in the script used in the writing of Chinese Qurans.



A



B

Fig.3. A: Calligraphy on the coffin of Chinese Muslims and B: An inscription of Quranic verses on the wall of a house in China. Source: Armijo, 2015, 5.

Most of these Qur'ans only contain three lines per page and are bolded, often written in thirty volumes instead of one volume, each volume contains a chapter of the Qur'an, therefore a complete Quran can be prepared in many volumes, chapters with different shapes and ornaments in a different time (Illumination and decoration in Chinese Qurans, 2017), like the 18th-century Quran whose various chapters have different gilding (Hall, 2008, 301). The top and bottom tables and side drawers are decorated with different patterns, and the labels at the top of the pages are often written in the same font (Fig. 5).

### The use of Buddhist elements and antiques in the decoration of Chinese Qurans

When gilding the pages of the Chinese Quran, images of objects from the background of Chinese culture



Fig. 4. A page of the Quran in Muhhaqiq script Ahmad ibn Suhrawardi. Source: Muqtada'i and Behzadi, 2017, 110.



Fig. 5. Three different chapters of a Qur'an, 18th century AD. Source: www.auction.rosebery.uk

and religion were used as if Buddhist architecture prevailed as a universal religion in Chinese Islamic architecture. Quran No. 2 dates back to the 17th century and was written on Khanbalgh paper (Indian paper) by “Amm Allah Noor Al-Elam bint Rashid Al-Din”; she is one of the few woman calligraphers among Muslims and one of the geniuses of this art (Islamic Art: Calligraphy, 1999).

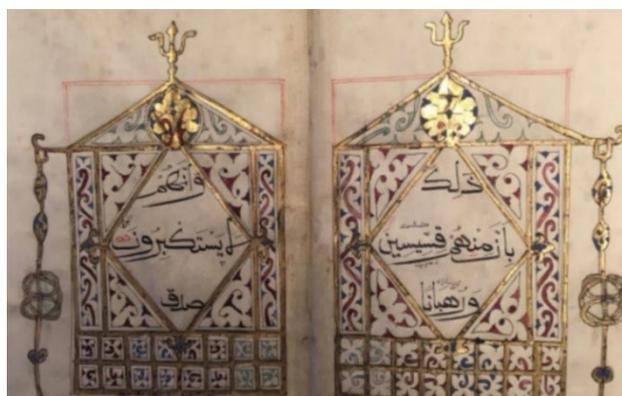
In this “Quran”, beside the text of the “Quran” and outside the frame, you can see the design of a small pagoda which is a Chinese Buddhist architectural characteristic. The design of the “chrysanthemum” is adopted below the pagoda. In Chinese culture, the chrysanthemum is a symbol of autumn and the four seasons, besides longevity and immortality, happiness, and a better life (Hall, 2008, 301).

According to the upper inscription of the surah, which contains the name of the surah, the classification of Makki or Madani, and the number of verses contained in it, the upper gilding may be inscribed at the beginning of the next surah. The upper inscription of Surah is red, and the end sign of the verse is drawn with a flower sign without a number (Fig. 6 A). In the Qur'an, No. 3, which is from the late seventeenth century, and is the third volume (Chapter three) of the collection of thirty volumes, a Chinese lantern with tassels hanging on hooks to the two outer sides of the Qur'anic text have strengthened the page frame. The lantern is one of the symbols of Chinese culture. Its history can be traced back to 1800 years ago. It is considered a symbol of auspiciousness, happiness, and a bright future for primary school students (Islamic and Indian Arts, 2020). The verses of this chapter are written in a diamond-shaped and lozenge-shaped space. At the top of these pages, a picture of a three-pronged spear and the Trishula is drawn which is the symbol of Buddhism and sometimes used as a symbol of the Buddhist trinity, in some cases as the head or body of the Buddha (Hall, 2008, 192). On another page of the same Quran, a leaf serves as a symbol for a half-chapter. Leaf is one of the



A

B



C

Fig. 6. A: Quran No.2. Source: www.davidmus.dk. B & C: Quran no.3, Source: www.bl.uk.



A



B



C

Fig. 7. A: Chinese pagoda in Shanghai, 3rd century AD, Source: Misra, 2015. B: Chinese lantern, Source: www.16pic.com , C: Image of Terry Shula on the footprint of Buddha, Gandhara, second to fourth centuries AD. Source: www.christies.com.

eight treasures of ancient Chinese culture and art, symbolizing pursuit and progress. The other seven treasures are a pair of horns, diamonds, coins, books, pearls, mirrors, and melody stones (Hall, 2008, 402); (Fig 6. B , 6.C , 7).

### The design and color of Chinese Qurans gilding

Chinese Quran often uses bright and vivid colors for decoration and gilding, such as green, red, and gold, which have the same color palette as Buddhist paintings and drawings. Quran No.4 contains the seventh chapter of the Qur'an, and Quran No. 5 contains the ninth chapter of the Qur'an, which was written in the 16th century by Rashid ibn Ahmad in the city of Yunnan (Islamic and Indian Arts, 2020). The mentioned colors are used in the gilding of these two volumes of the Qur'an, and the mark of "Peony" or "Mutan" can be seen in the top two corners of them in golden color. In Chinese culture and art, this flower is a symbol of wealth, fame, and immortality (ibid., 302); (Figs. 8 & 9).

In Quran No. 6, which is the 17th century Qur'an, the presence of bright colors and the predominance of gold in gilding are quite obvious. Decorative patterns on the margins of cards are often flowers and leaves, which are shown in the top and bottom margins, and on the sides of lines, and the background of the text is usually devoid of patterns and color. This Qur'an has a pattern on the bottom edge that is tied and interlaced with gold and is very similar to the motifs used in Buddhist visual symbols such as the Eternal Knot (Fig 10).

In Quran No. 7, which is related to the ninth chapter (volume) of the Qur'an from the 17th century AD, and is stored in the Tariq Rajab Museum in Kuwait (manuscript dated to the 12th century AH, n.d). The Quran No. 8, refers to the 18th century, the Ming Dynasty in China, flowers, and leaves are presented in a raw manner, without intricate decorations and details, in a realistic frame around the text. In Quran



Fig. 8. A: Quran no.4, B: Quran no.5. Source: www.auction.roseberry.

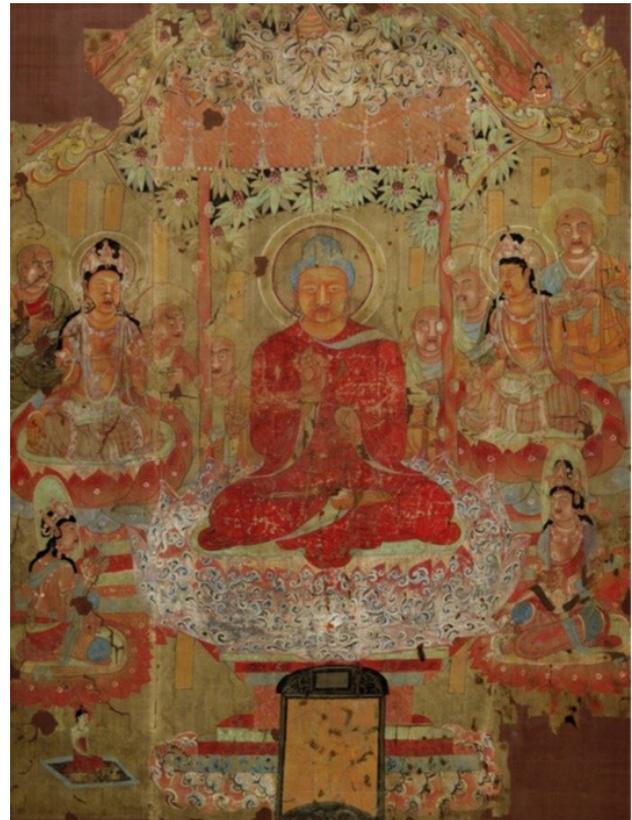


Fig. 9. Buddha teaches religion, ink water and color on silk, early eighth century. Source: Fisher, 1390, 305.

No. 9, such real plant decorations can be seen outside the frame. These areas are usually included in the usual gilding in the Quran of the Islamic world and contain information about fivefold, tenfold, and the number of chapters. In all three Quran, the peony is seen as the main decoration in the center of the frame around it or above it. and semicircular frames, outside the frame around the text, and on a golden background. In the two semicircles and the outer part of the frame and in the sign of Shamsa, the surah's name: Muzamel and the chapter: Fifth are written, and the divine names are written in circular frames on both sides at the top and bottom of the pages In Quran No. 11, which dates from the 18th century, two inscriptions on each side, above and beyond the text, are depicted inside the flame. The flame in Buddhist images represents the Buddha

and Buddhists and is a sign of light and wisdom or the fig tree, which is one of the constant symbols of Buddhism (Hall, 1387, 220). These inscriptions are written in a different verse font and unreadable in such a way that at first glance they look more like a sign than a text, and possibly contain information about the surah, chapter, or divine names, or even a five- and tenfold sign (Fig. 11).

#### Calligraphy of Chinese Quranic inscriptions

The inscriptions and chapters of the Chinese Qur'an are located outside the text of the verse and contain information about each Surah, the number of its verses, the Makki or Madani classification, the number of Surahs and the number of chapters or records of the Qur'an, and a font other than the Qur'anic script. There are no requirements for legibility or other rules



Fig. 10. A: Quran No. 6. Source: www.bl.uk. B: Eternal Knot. Source: www.symbolsarchive.com.



A



B



C

Fig. 11. A: Quran No.7, Source: www.usna.edu. B: Quran No. 8, Source: www.pinterest.com/Chinese Quran Ming / Sing dynasty. C: Quran No. 9. Source: www.roseberry.uk .

governing the text of the verses, and they are usually more circular in shape. In Quran No.10, which is the fifth chapter of the 17th-century Quran, the inscriptions are written in circular On the entrance page, as well as on the leather cover of Quran No. 12, Chinese art influences, the round Arabic spelling of the phrase (Figs. 12 & 13) “In the Name of Allah, the Most Companionate and Merciful, “ which belongs to the tenth volume (chapter) and was written in the 18th century, can be seen (Fig.14).

### Conclusion

Based on the Quran case presented, and the explanation, it is clear that the Chinese Quran calligraphy in form point of view is a combination of Chinese calligraphy in the composition of the writing Arabic alphabet letters with brush twists. Besides, in some cases even a combination of the Arabic form of the letter with the Chinese form of the letters, especially in the head-surahs and five and tenfold, which makes the Arabic-Chinese script different from the ordinary script in the Islamic world. The Sini calligraphy used to write the “Quran” is written in the official script due to the size, surface, and roundness of the characters, the uniformity of the pen movement, and the harmony and adaptation to the writing method is similar to Muhhaqiq inscription. In the gilding of the Quran, the most commonly used elements are flowers and leaves. They have their symbolic meaning in ancient Chinese culture. Their dominant theme is the desire to live forever, gain power and wealth. Among them, the most common pattern is peony or deformed flowers. In addition to flowers, tassel lanterns are used as a gilded practical and symbolic object in ancient Chinese culture, showing the fusion of Chinese culture and the graphic art of the Quran. Symbolic Buddhist motifs such as flames, Trishula, pagoda designs, and eternal knots are also used to decorate the pages of the Quran. The colors used are also very bright, like gold, green, and red. This is the palette of Buddhist paintings, showing



A



B

Fig. 12. A: Quran No. 10. Source: www.bl.uk. B: Quran No. 11. Source: www.christies.com.



Fig.13. Image of Buddha in a middle of the flame, Painting on Cloth, 15th Century. Source: www.artang.ir.

that the new religion is not only compatible with the texture and background, but also compatible with the current religion of the target country. Perhaps this



Fig. 14. 30 and 31. Leather cover and the first page of Quran No. 12, Source: www.bl.uk.

integration and localization have allowed people to better accept the new religion and its characteristics.

Declaration of non-conflict of interest:

The authors state that they had no conflicts of interest while conducting this research.

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