Mosques and Markets: Traditional Urban Form on China’s Northwestern Frontiers

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The Chinese have long been known for their ancient and well-defined urban traditions. This article explores the ways in which those traditions were both maintained and transformed on China’s multicultural northwestern frontiers in the Late Imperial period, and provides a brief overview of the contemporary situation. After a general discussion of traditional Chinese urban form and urban design on the frontier, the article uses case studies of four frontier cities — Lanzhou, Xining, Hohhot and Urumqi — to illustrate ways in which divided settlement morphologies, culturally distinct neighborhood landscapes, functional differentiation of space along ethnic lines, and cross-cultural diffusion of architectural and ornamentation styles contributed to the development of distinctive urban forms.

In the late nineteenth century Chinese residents of Dihua (Urumqi), the desert capital of China’s Xinjiang Province, referred to the large, fortified gateway which separated the walled Chinese settlement from the walled Muslim settlement as the “gate which divides heaven from earth.” In so distancing themselves from their near neighbors, with whom they were inextricably linked through the economic and social life of the city, they affirmed a social hierarchy which had long been expressed in the form and function of cities across the vast expanses of China’s northwestern frontier regions. Wherever the Chinese established and developed these frontier fort-cities to control and maintain trade and trade routes they not only replicated the archetypal urban forms of the eastern core area, but also accommodated cultural diversity through the development of distinctive frontier urban forms. This article will suggest that the adaptation of both the Chinese and the frontier peoples to multicultural urban life in pre-revolutionary China was articulated in urban form in four ways.

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1. **Divided settlement morphology.** Congregation of different peoples into distinct neighborhoods and settlement areas based on ethnicity, place of origin, religious beliefs, occupation and economic status, including physical separation within multiple-walled cities, resulted in a five-part division of space, from the predominantly Chinese precincts of the central walled core to the tent camps of nomads on nearby pasture lands.

2. **Culturally distinct neighborhood landscapes.** Cultural variation in the organization and construction of urban space occurred differently within the five divisions of urban space to the extent permitted within the limitations imposed by the Chinese urban superstructure.

3. **Functional differentiation.** Economic and social functions within the urban sphere tended to be differentiated by ethnicity both as prescribed and controlled by the Chinese and through the choice and tradition of the non-Chinese peoples.

4. **Cross-cultural diffusion.** The diffusion of architectural and urban design practices between peoples was expressed in the physical and social construction of the urban landscape of the frontiers.

These four historical processes provide a basis for understanding the vernacular landscapes of contemporary frontier cities. While the massive reworking of urban form wrought by China's socialist transformation continues to alter the traditional landscapes of cities on the northwestern frontier, nonetheless, the distinctive patterns and styles of the multicultural frontier cities persist.

This article first discusses traditional Chinese urban form, cultural diversity in frontier cities, and urban design on the frontier, and then highlights in turn each of the four characteristics of cultural diversity in frontier cities, and urban design on the frontier cities persist.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE URBAN FORM

Chinese urban history spans both a long time frame and a vast region. Although traditional Chinese cities varied considerably across the centuries and China’s vast territory, some aspects of Chinese urban form and conception remained remarkably consistent from ancient times to the late nineteenth century. By the Late Imperial period (1368-1911) the typical Chinese city stood solid among the fields and villages of rural China — its massive crenellated walls with their carefully placed guard towers and gates surrounding elaborate multistoried temples, bell and drum towers, and expanses of one- and two-story structures, all located in relation to a grid of primary avenues oriented to the cardinal directions. Below these rudimentary aspects of morphology lay a multilayered philosophical underpinning: Chinese urban design practice was shaped by a set of ideal principles addressing relationships between people, their constructs, and nature.

City siting and planning were grounded not only in administrative and economic utility, but also in traditions influenced by beliefs in ideal urban forms that had been established and passed down through centuries of scholarly writing and construction practice. Thus, geomancers were consulted to ensure the city’s favorable position in both the natural and supernatural worlds, and texts were consulted to reproduce the city in accordance with the historical ideal. The primary features of this traditional Chinese urban ideal included the following: (1) the siting of the city on the basis of geomantic principles; (2) the establishment of city walls following a square or rectangular path; (3) the placement of important political and religious structures near the center of the city; and (4) the orientation of the city walls, main axial streets (anchored by gates), all monumental structures, and many private homes along north-south axes. As Nancy Schatzman Steinhardt has noted, the achievement of the ideal was so important to the legitimization of political regimes that published plans of imperial capitals were often rendered more true to the ideal than the settlements actually were.

Like the physical structure of the city, many social and cultural elements were defined by decree, tradition and practice. Thus, the political and social elites occupied the most favored space in the city, usually near the center of the central walled core, while those with the least social power were barred access to many of the city’s walled and gated precincts. Power was measured first in terms of political status, second by ethnicity, and only third by economic wealth. Not only were the walls themselves physical boundaries between social status areas, such as those between the Chinese and non-Chinese realms of the cities, but the space within the city walls was further subdivided as well. Urban neighborhoods both within and outside the city walls tended to be organized around trade, craft, and place-of-origin guilds. If non-Chinese people lived within the central walled city, they were often expected or required to live in designated enclaves, such as those established at Ningbo in the thirteenth century and Nanjing in the fourteenth century.

![FIGURE 1. City locations and the frontier.](image-url)
This traditional city form served as both a physical and a socio-cultural superstructure, which was reproduced throughout Chinese-controlled territory despite widely varying environmental and social conditions. While the placement of monumental features and primary streets was carefully planned, the development of the areas between monumental structures was often left to individual builders. Nonetheless, while variations reflecting regional context thus occurred within the precincts of the city, these did not, for the most part, affect the superstructure.

In contrast to the rigid specifications of the core walled area, settlement outside the city walls, normally clustered around the major land or water entrances to the city, was comparatively unplanned. These outlying districts were sometimes surrounded by secondary walls to protect the residents and encourage commercial development. During peaceful periods and with population growth in Late Imperial times, settlements outside the walls sometimes grew quite large, with populations surpassing those within the walls. This was often a response to higher rates of taxation and/or overcrowding within the central walled area. In these urban areas outside the walled central core planning, settlement and architectural expression took place within a more flexible context than in the Chinese core area, and as a result, landscapes were more overtly influenced by cultural or regional conditions.

On the frontiers, Chinese urban forms served as both physical and symbolic superstructures within which a variety of non-Chinese and variant Chinese urban forms coexisted. Traditional Chinese urban form exhibited a fundamental dualism between the monumental, carefully planned superstructure and the vernacular landscape. In the case of frontier cities, the disjunction between the monumental Chinese aspects of the cities and vernacular landscapes influenced by local conditions, traditions and cultures was particularly striking.

### CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN TRADITIONAL FRONTIER CITIES

During the Late Imperial period, nearly all of the ethnically Chinese (Han) population lived in the eastern third of China’s claimed land area, while the remaining two-thirds of the land area was occupied sparsely and almost entirely by non-Chinese peoples, with the exception of the frontier fort-cities. Within China at the time there were three main types of culturally diverse cities: (1) administrative centers in the core area, such as Xi’an and Beijing, where small populations of peoples from all corners of the empire and foreign emissaries gathered; (2) coastal trade centers, such as Quanzhou and Guangzhou, which developed small enclaves of foreign traders and, over time, enclave communities of the traders’ descendants; and (3) inland frontier administrative/trade cities established within the homelands of non-Chinese peoples, such as Xining and Urumqi. The inland cities of the northwestern frontier are the subject of this article.

The northwestern frontiers were home to many peoples: primarily Tibetans, Mongolians, and a diverse set of Islamic peoples. In many cases populations of all three settled either within or in the vicinity of the Chinese frontier fort-cities. The ethnic composition of these cities varied considerably, and each of the four cities considered in this study — Lanzhou, Xining, Hohhot and Urumqi — was situated in a distinctive cultural milieu. In the Late Imperial period each had majority population of Han Chinese migrants (often including the descendants of migrants from a wide range of Chinese provinces), along with a significant population of Manchu during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). In all four cases the largest minority group represented within the cities themselves was the Muslim Chinese (Hui). Each city, however, also included distinctive populations of other peoples which varied considerably by region. The frontier cities were thus far more diverse than their eastern counterparts. In Lanzhou significant groups included the Dongxiang (Muslim descendants of Chinese-Mongol intermarriages) and Sala (Muslim migrants from Central Asia). Tibetans also played an important role in Lanzhou’s urban realm, although they lived outside the city proper. Like Lanzhou, Xining supported a significant population of Sala Muslims and a nearby population of Tibetans, while nomadic Tibetans and Mongolians also participated in the life of the city. In Hohhot large numbers of Mongolians, most of whom were associated with the city’s monasteries, joined the Chinese, Muslim Chinese, and Manchu, as well as sojourning Mongolian nomads, in creating a complex cultural landscape. In Urumqi the Chinese, Manchu, and Muslim Chinese population was augmented by a number of Islamic peoples within the city walls, including Uygur, Tatar and Sala. Kazak nomads also traded within the city, and during the nineteenth century Urumqi also developed a large trade settlement of “foreigners” (primarily Russians, but with a few Americans and Europeans).

### URBAN DESIGN ON THE FRONTIER

The Chinese were the regional minority in the frontier regions, and alternative local architectural and urban traditions, combined with the marked difference in local availability of building materials, presented the potential for quite different and distinctive cities. At the monumental scale, however, such distinctive urban forms did not develop. Quite to the contrary, Chinese cities on the frontier were built with rigid, if sometimes unsophisticated, adherence to the basic tenets and archetypes of Chinese city building.

Nearly all of the Chinese cities on the northwestern frontiers began as military outposts. As early as the Han dynasty (206 BC-221 AD), forts were constructed that carried out a number of urban functions while fulfilling their primary mission of guarding key trade routes and maintaining the integrity of the empire. Fort-cities were intended to be self-sufficient.
Under the Han dynasty tun tian system, more than half the personnel in frontier forts were laborers assigned to support the fort’s soldiers; similar arrangements were common throughout the history of the Chinese frontiers.

Fort settlements varied in size from only a handful of soldiers and support personnel to thousands with their families. Most never developed beyond their limited function as forts and small way-stations along transport routes. Dozens passed into obscurity as the often-tenuous and factional political and economic power of the Chinese empire waxed and waned on the frontier. But a few, most prominently Lanzhou and Xining (both founded in the second century BC), survived and flourished for more than two millennia as multifunctional cities and towns that eventually became centers of regional development and drew both Chinese and non-Chinese people for purposes ranging from trade and administration to religious pilgrimage. Hohhot and Urumqi were established much later, during the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, yet followed similar patterns of development.

Chinese-built cities on the frontier were established in previously unoccupied sites, though they were sometimes built quite close to indigenous settlements or the ruins of earlier Chinese settlements. Moreover, unlike cities and towns in eastern China, which sometimes grew from agricultural villages, the frontier cities were purpose-built as walled forts. The general locations of military outpost-cities were determined by central authorities, who dispatched soldiers to construct them. In the absence of the geomancers often employed in eastern China to attune cities to their natural sites and situations, the military builders of fort-cities selected specific sites on the basis of military concerns and used standardized plans for laying out the cities.

These standardized plans called for square cities with either four or six gates, with a primary street grid formed either by four streets crossing at right angles in a grid pattern (§), or two orthogonal streets meeting at the center in a “cross” pattern (+). The central walled areas of cities on the northwestern frontier tended to conform to Chinese urban ideals with greater frequency than their more subtly planned counterparts in eastern China. Frontier cities also tended to be square more often than their core-area counterparts, and to employ simple axial street patterns, central positioning of key monumental structures, and faithful orientation with the cardinal directions.

Outside the central walled core area, the functional and spatial integration of non-Chinese peoples into the urban milieu stood in contrast to the strictly Chinese forms of the city center. Non-Chinese neighborhoods in walled suburbs attached to the core walled area often reflected the diverse cultural characteristics of their inhabitants. Monumental structures in these neighborhoods, such as temples and mosques, conformed to the general Chinese patterns but sported a wide variety of non-Chinese decorative features. Houses were built in non-Chinese or modified Chinese styles using locally available building materials, and markets and restaurants displayed distinctive wares catering to non-Chinese tastes. Some of these distinctly non-Chinese landscapes survive in contemporary frontier cities. In Urumqi’s old Muslim neighborhoods, for example, are narrow alleys of mud-walled courtyard houses interspersed with mosques, markets and restaurants catering to both the local Muslim population and growing numbers of traders from neighboring Central Asian countries. Beyond the walled areas described above each frontier city developed a dispersed functional urban realm which contained a variety of settlements built in characteristic local, non-Chinese forms. These will be discussed in more detail below.

DIVIDED SETTLEMENT MORPHOLOGY

Chinese frontier cities rarely began as multicultural, multiwalled settlements. Rather, they began as small Chinese forts, then grew to encompass broader spatial and functional spheres. The construction of new walled areas usually came in response to a growing and changing population. In many regions of the frontier, from the Tang dynasty onward and especially during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), those Chinese frontier towns that survived gradually developed a distinctive multicultural urban form. At the heart of this form was a Chinese-built and occupied core area, with an adjacent non-Chinese urban settlement, both of which were spatially and functionally related to communities of non-Chinese people who lived outside the city proper but were integrated into the local urban economy. At its most complex, the multicultural landscape of the typical Chinese frontier city included at least five zones representing settlements of distinct peoples (fig. 2). These were (1) the Chinese walled core; (2a) attached or (2b) adjacent non-Chinese or low-status Chinese walled suburbs; (3) attached non-walled suburbs; (4) close (within a day’s journey), but physically separate, non-Chinese settlements; and (5) non-Chinese settlements within the greater functional urban sphere. Zones 1-3 comprised the city proper and often took multiwalled forms, and sometimes double-city forms. This landscape was further...
systematized by the congregation of Chinese and Muslim people, in particular, into separate neighborhoods based on occupation and place of origin within the walled precincts. Beyond the immediate walled city and its walled and unwalled suburbs (zones 1-3), there was often an urban sphere that included both a set of satellite communities with economic, social or political ties to the city itself but which remained physically separate from the walled urban center (zone 4), and pasture areas where nomads camped and herded (zone 5). Thus, for example, in the area surrounding Xining a number of Tibetan and Muslim communities developed which engaged in market gardening and other farming and livestock activities for the markets of Xining, but which remained spatially separate from the city itself.

In many cases, settlement immediately outside the city walls of the core area consisted of clusters of structures grouped around road or port entrances to the city. This type of settlement pattern was not unlike the faubourg settlements that formed along the roads and at the gates leading to medieval French castles. In China these suburbs were later walled in when the authorities of the central city decided to protect or control the residents of these outer areas. Thus, whereas the construction of walls for the core area usually preceded settlement, secondary, suburban walls followed settlement. This resulted in two distinct city forms: the double-walled (or multiple-walled) city with one or more walled settlements physically attached to the city (as in zone 2a in Figure 2); and twin-walled cities, where the adjacent outer settlements were walled but physically separated by a short distance from the Chinese city center (as in zone 2b in Figure 2).

The development of this spatial hierarchy within the urban form was long a feature of Chinese urbanism, but it became most highly developed during the Ming and Qing periods. The Qing dynasty Manchu domination of China added another level of complexity both to the overall ethnic mosaic of cities on the frontier and to their urban morphology. The Manchu Qing retained the Ming style of urban development to the extent that they built square walled cities in the classic Chinese style. But the Manchu also adopted the concept of ethnic self-segregation, separating themselves not only from the Chinese, but also from other non-Chinese peoples. This created twin city forms in which the Manchu built separate walled rectangular enclaves for themselves at a short distance from pre-existing Chinese/non-Chinese settlements. While the Manchu replicated this form throughout China, it was most common on the frontier. By the fifteenth century, many cities in China had double or twin walls. One of the most commonly cited examples of a double-walled city is Late Imperial Beijing. Many other core-area cities had similar differentiated districts at some point in their history. Nonetheless, cities with walled, ethnically-based suburbs were far more common on the frontier. An analysis of 233 city plans from all regions of China indicates that by the late nineteenth century, as many as 62 percent of frontier cities had multiple walls, while for the whole of China, only 15 percent of cities had multiple-walled forms.

**Figure 3. The development of walled settlements at Lanzhou.**

**Four Frontier Cities: Lanzhou, Xining, Hohhot and Urumqi**

Lanzhou began its Chinese history between 115 BC and 111 BC. During this period armies that the Han emperor had sent to conscript local labor established two small fort-cities on the site in order to operate and control a ferry terminal on the Yellow River. Lanzhou gradually grew to serve as a main way-post on the then-expanding Silk Route (fig. 3). As the Silk Route declined in the third century AD, the region fell under the control of the nomadic empire of the Xianbi, and the Chinese did not regain control until the Sui and Tang dynasties (581-907), when the city was reestablished as a Silk Route town and also became a major site for the tea-and-horse trade between the Chinese and the nomads. As the course of the Yellow River gradually shifted northward, the city was rebuilt several times, with new walls on new sites constructed in 1081, 1083 and 1377. The 1377 core-area wall, faced in brick by the Ming administration, lasted into the twentieth century and can still be seen on a few scattered sites in the city. In classic traditional Chinese style, the walled city was rectangular in form, and was oriented to the cardinal directions, with one large gate on each
side. Throughout its early history Lanzhou developed as a series of single-walled cities.

During the fifteenth century several new walls were constructed at Lanzhou to enclose adjacent areas of the city to the west, south and southeast where large populations of Muslims had settled. In 1436 a wall was constructed to enclose a settlement of Chinese tradesmen and Muslims on the south and west sides of the city. In 1447 another adjacent settlement was walled, enclosing the eastern side of the core area so that all sides of the city (except the north, which stood on the banks of the Yellow River) were flanked by walled settlements. The eastern suburb was enlarged in 1497 to house military personnel. During the Qing dynasty the Manchu constructed a separate walled fort outside the main walls of the city. This Manchu settlement remained small and separate, rather than becoming the nucleus of a second settlement as was common in many other cities. Urban growth instead remained concentrated around the old Chinese core area. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Lanzhou was a flourishing commercial city with a complex cultural landscape.

Like Lanzhou, Xining was established during the Han dynasty. First founded as a Chinese garrison in 121 BC, the city was the main settlement in a turbulent region in which control passed back and forth between the Chinese, Tibetans, and other nomadic peoples at least six times before the Mongols finally secured it for the empire in 1227. Prior to the Mongol conquest, Xining had served as the capital of a Tibetan kingdom. This capital was a rectangular walled city 10 km. in circumference divided by a north-south wall into eastern and western sections. Its population included at least a thousand Tibetan families, with the elites cloistered inside the palace confines of the western section. By the Ming dynasty, Xining had become a multicultural city. In 1380, soon after the Ming secured the city for their newly founded empire, the Islamic community built a mosque that became the focal point for all the Islamic communities in the region. In 1386 the city's primary walls were rebuilt with a circumference of 4.5 km., to enclose approximately half the area previously enclosed by walls. Subsequently, a second wall was constructed which enclosed the Muslim settlement which had formed around the mosque on the eastern side of the city proper (FIG. 4).

Hohhot was long an indigenous city site, although the first Chinese garrison was established there in the first century BC. Like Xining, control over the region was disputed and the site passed back and forth between different peoples over the centuries. The Chinese first lost control of the region in the second century AD. The indigenous Toba clan eventually established a capital, Shengle, at the site of an old Han garrison in 259 AD. This city made use of the walls of the former Han garrison as a portion of a multiple-walled city. In the seventh century the Chinese reasserted power in the region and constructed several forts at the site. After the Tang era, Chinese control lapsed again and another non-Chinese group, the Liao, gained control of the site. The Liao established Fengzhou, a walled city 4.5 km. in circumference, just east of present-day Hohhot. In the mid-sixteenth century Mongolians controlled the region, and established a monastic city at the site. The Ming dynasty eventually established an administrative post at Hohhot; and by 1634, when the Manchu first arrived at the city (then called Guihua by the Chinese), the city comprised a small, walled Chinese administrative outpost adjacent to a densely populated area settled by Chinese, Mongolians, and Islamic peoples in separate, unwalled communities. This settlement included several Mongolian Lamaist (Tibetan Buddhist) monasteries that, along with the Chinese imperial state, owned much of the local land and resources.

In 1735-39 the Manchu constructed a separate walled fort-city, Suiyuan, to house their Eighth Army and its support staff (FIG. 5). This settlement, which was larger than the pre-existing city, was constructed just over two kilometers northeast of Guihua. The fort operated as a self-contained city in its own right, but, at the same time, it maintained strong ties with Guihua, where most of the region’s trade was carried out.
Present-day Hohhot has developed from the expansion of urban settlement around and between these two nuclei.

Urumqi was first established in the mid-eighteenth century, when the Qing constructed a small fort there to protect a trade route. The Manchu first commissioned the construction of a single-walled city (Dihua) in 1767. Chinese and Manchu lived together in this city for only a few years before the Manchu constructed a separate walled settlement for themselves, Gongning Cheng, about 2.5 km. northwest of Dihua. A settlement for Muslims was also walled in on the south side of Dihua, and contained a number of different Islamic peoples (FIG.6). This multiethnic trading center grew further during the nineteenth century when a number of foreign firms (primarily Russian) were established there, and the new foreign residents settled south of the walled Islamic settlement. The twin-city structure of Urumqi was ended abruptly in the late nineteenth century, when the Manchu city (Gongning Cheng) was burned down during a revolt led by Muslims, and the Manchu retreated to the walled precincts of the Chinese city for the remainder of the Qing era.

CULTURALLY DISTINCT NEIGHBORHOOD LANDSCAPES

While the Chinese urban superstructure imposed some limits on cultural variation in the organization and construction of urban space, within the districts and settlement zones of cities and the wider urban realms diverse cultural practices and traditions of different ethnic and regional populations created distinct local neighborhood patterns of urban morphology and architecture. Neighborhoods with distinctive cultural characteristics developed and were tolerated as long as they did not conflict with the cultural, social and political goals and requirements of “Chinese” urban design and administration. Within the central, square-walled Chinese city the superstructure was laid out on a grid pattern of streets, with monumental structures placed at key intersections; opportunities for stylistic variations were limited to architectural variations within the blocks. In the walled settlements attached to the outside of the core walled area, settlement was much less confined within the bounds of a rigid, gridded street pattern. Instead, a single main street led from the outer gate to the gate which divided the outer walled settlement from the core walled area, creating a linear “spine” pattern. From this main linear street, which was usually lined with shops, stalls and inns, narrow, crooked alleyways led into small neighborhoods of courtyard houses, mosques, temples and local markets. Larger mosques and markets were sometimes located along the main street. In Urumqi, for example, the rigid north-south, east-west grid of the Chinese city was broken in the southern walled Islamic settlement, where streets followed a less geometric pattern in the neighborhoods adjacent to a northwest-southeast axis street. Similarly, at both Xining and Lanzhou the grid of the central Chinese cities broke into elongated, linear street patterns in the walled suburbs. At Hohhot, while the Manchu part of the city (Suiyuan) and the small walled Chinese fort area in the old city (at Guihua) were laid out on rigid, orthogonal grids, the remaining streets consisted of a few primary axis thoroughfares that traversed a maze of meandering alleys and dead-end streets.

Muslim neighborhoods, where a mosque and adjacent street market provided a focus for the community, were a distinctive feature of most Chinese frontier cities. Muslim neighborhoods were usually located outside the central walled area of the city in alleyways off the main street of the walled secondary settlement. Both Han Chinese and Central Asian Muslim traditions favored the clustering of retailers according to trade within the markets, and thus the Muslim markets were easily accommodated in the Chinese city. These markets usually included both retail and service functions, such as food shops, tailors, and repair shops. In Urumqi, the walled Islamic neighborhood south of the south gate was a maze of microvillages, each with its mosque and market. There, the Uygur, Tatar, Sala and Muslim Chinese each had distinct communities within the greater structure of the Islamic settlement (FIG.7). In Urumqi’s Ningxiawan area, where Muslim Chinese migrants from Ningxia established the city’s first Islamic neighborhood, there were separate mosques for groups of Muslim Chinese migrants from Suiyuan (modern-day Hohhot), Xining, Suzhou and Lanzhou, as well as separate mosques for other Islamic peoples such as the Sala. Other mosques in the southern walled area were established separately by Muslim Chinese from Shaanxi, Uygur migrants from Hami, and Tatar migrants.

FIGURE 6. The development of walled settlements at Urumqi.
In Hohhot, where the Muslim population was predominately Muslim Chinese, there was an organized network of mosques within the old city, named after their locations as the North, Northeast, South, East and West Mosques. The Great Mosque of Hohhot, located just to the north of the north gate of the city in the midst of the city’s main Muslim settlement area, served as the Friday mosque.

Chinese frontier cities typically were located at considerable distances from each other, with the intervening regions inhabited by non-Chinese agricultural and nomadic peoples. The rural hinterland immediately around the cities tended to consist of villages of non-Chinese people or of Chinese Muslims. Some non-Chinese peoples, such as the Tibetans, maintained their own settlement patterns outside the frontier cities, settling at some distance from the core area of the Chinese city. Villages surrounding the city could be spatially separate and quite distinct in form from the city itself while still being integrated into the economic and social structures of the urban area. In Xining, for example, Tibetans lived in villages scattered among the foothills of the valley in which Xining is located, in some cases several kilometers distant from the densely settled area of Xining proper. In form and architecture, these Tibetan settlements, with their clusters of one- and two-story courtyard houses in Tibetan style and their village shrines and Buddhist temples, were quite distinctive from Chinese settlements. Records from the early years of the Qing dynasty indicate that of the nineteen Tibetan clans which carried out trade with Xining, six lived in walled towns near the city. The Jiazhong clan, for example, had a walled village with 600 residents about 16 kilometers from Xining. In some cases predominately Tibetan villages were themselves multiethnic, with some Muslim Chinese villages themselves multiethnic, with some Muslim Chinese and Chinese residents.

FUNCTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION

Economic roles within the city were often divided along ethnic lines, following patterns established by the Chinese for themselves, in which the Chinese people living within a city tended to specialize in guild-centered trades on the basis of clan or place of origin. Similarly, non-Chinese peoples tended to pass on occupational specializations from generation to generation. In traditional Chinese cities it was common for districts with distinct economic functions to remain spatially separate. Commercial streets and blocks could usually be identified with specializations, such as booksellers, tailors or metal-smiths. This economic differentiation often complemented congregation of peoples within the city. Non-Chinese peoples often carried out different trades from the Chinese, and these trades were carried out in spatially separate locations from the Chinese trade neighborhoods. It was common for the Muslim Chinese to assume occupations many Chinese would have considered distasteful, such as butcher, tanner and money-lender, as well as such other more common occupations as jeweler, innkeeper, tea trader, interpreter and caravaneer. The Muslim Chinese also served as brokers in transactions between the Chinese and the other non-Chinese peoples.

In regions in which a number of non-Chinese groups resided, functional hierarchies usually developed among the non-Chinese groups in their economic relations with the Chinese. Thus, the Muslim Chinese served as brokers for trade not only between the Tibetans and the Chinese, but also between Tibetans. This practice continues today. Tibetan traders, for example, deal in furs, animal horns, traditional medicines, and woven goods with Muslim Chinese merchants in Xining, who then retail these items in stalls in Xining’s markets.

In urban areas with Mongolian or Tibetan as well as Chinese populations, the economic function of both Mongolians and Tibetans was primarily to provide pastoral trade products, such as wool, hides and horses. It was not unusual for nomadic or semi-nomadic inhabitants of the surrounding regions to become at least partially integrated into the urban economy. These itinerant hunters, herdsmen and
traders contributed much to the economic integrity of the frontier outposts, whose very existence was often based on trade in goods produced beyond their demesne. Although long-distance trade in northwestern China during the two periods of the Silk Road (second century BC — third century AD, and seventh century AD — fifteenth century AD) is usually thought of in terms of those goods which passed through the northwestern frontier cities, there was also demand in China's eastern core area for goods produced within the frontier zones. Horses bred by Mongolians and Tibetans were enough in demand by the seventh century that the Chinese empire established official "tea-and-horse" markets. Tea became a staple drink among the peoples of the frontier, while frontier-bred horses were prized throughout the empire, particularly for their military uses. Most of the tea traded at the northwestern tea-and-horse markets came from Sichuan and Hunan provinces.

Government-controlled, taxed markets were established adjacent to or within the vicinity of frontier cities to facilitate trade between the Chinese and Tibetan and Mongolian horse-breeders. At the city of Xining, for example, the tea-and-horse market was located on the northern edge of the city. Chinese records classified the clans of Tibetans in the region according to the average number of horses they brought to market each year (which were considered to be tribute to the empire). In the nineteenth century clan tributes ranged from fifteen horses per year, brought by the Dabushou clan who lived and herded nearby, to 550 horses per year, brought by the Longba clan who lived and herded some distance from the city. Other products brought by Tibetans to exchange with the Chinese included yak-cattle crossbreeds, wool, felt, musk, horse tails, buzzards, and fox furs.

During the Late Imperial period, however, trade in these products was increasingly managed privately rather than in the government-controlled market.

The markets of Hohhot during the Qing era provide a good example of the different scales of trade carried out between the Mongolians, the Chinese, and the Manchu in Late Imperial times. There were five kinds of markets in Hohhot: the tribute (tea-and-horse) market of the imperial court, government markets, people's markets, night markets, and small local markets. The government-controlled markets were primarily involved in regulating the horse trade, for which rules were negotiated and trade mainly took place between Mongolian feudal chiefs and the Ming court. The people's markets and night markets were the sites of trade in common goods between Mongolians and Chinese. The Mongolians brought camels, cattle and sheep, hides, horseshair, horse tails, felt, salt, fodder, wood products, gold and silver to trade for grains, cloth, spun threads and yarns, silks and satins, kitchen and farming implements, cotton, tea and agricultural products. Hohhot developed especially as a regional trade center, to which Mongolians from outlying regions came to trade at special markets once or twice each year.

The non-Chinese populations of frontier cities also generated economic activity through their support of religious institutions. They supported religious professionals such as Muslim imams and Tibetan and Mongolian lamas, and produced specialized foods, arts and architecture related to religious customs. By the late eighteenth century, for example, the city of Hohhot supported 40 lamaist temples housing about 3,000 monks.

In addition to their economic functions, the Chinese frontier cities played a key role in the political systems of the Chinese empire. The Chinese empire used local leaders, especially Mongolians and Tibetans, to control far-flung frontier nomadic populations, a system that Owen Lattimore called "frontier feudalism." What is notable about the system of frontier feudalism, in urban terms, is that Chinese patronage led some local leaders to establish homes in the vicinity of frontier cities in order to participate in the patronage system. For example, the Inner Mongolian capital of Hohhot had a number of homes for elite Mongols to use, often with courtyards large enough to accommodate a yurt when necessary or desirable. It also contained edifices such as the Chinese-style palace of Princess Haibang, which served the needs of both the Chinese princess (married to a Mongol leader in 1697) and her new Mongolian family.

Non-Chinese communities carried out some community-oriented administrative functions separate from those of the Chinese. Islamic communities, for example, sometimes maintained the practice of the shari'a (Islamic law). There is evidence that the early Islamic communities along the Chinese coast, composed primarily of migrants and traders, were governed almost entirely by the shari'a in spite of the fact that they were located in or adjacent to Chinese cities. When Islamic communities were organized around place-of-origin-associated mosques, in particular, these mosques administered and adjudicated the affairs of their communities. For example, the Shaanxi mosque and the Qinghai mosque in Urumqi served the needs, respectively, of Islamic migrants from Shaanxi and Qinghai. Other non-Chinese groups also maintained their own administrative and judicial structures for the resolution of their affairs. In Hohhot, Lamaist monasteries held land, collected taxes, and provided administrative and judicial functions for the Mongolian community living within the city.

CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFUSION

The Chinese had a substantial impact on the architectural and urban-planning practices of non-Chinese peoples living within the Chinese frontier cities. The limitations of the grid and superstructure constrained the ability of some non-
Chinese peoples to build in accordance with their belief systems. For example, Islamic people were not normally permitted to construct tall, pointed minarets, as the Chinese believed that such structures would pierce the sky and possibly harm the free flow of good forces through the air, thus affecting the site’s feng shui (geomancy). The rigidly structured primary grid of the city, oriented to the cardinal directions, made it difficult for non-Chinese peoples to build large structures against orientation of the grid. This had a substantial impact on the siting of mosques in Chinese cities, which were often oriented due west rather than precisely toward Mecca.

These two influences on building and site development, possibly together with other factors such as a desire to conform to the Chinese landscape restrictions, or in some cases a lack of alternative monumental architectural models to draw on, led to the development of a distinctive form of mosque architecture in China. Monumental structures built within the city’s walled precincts were nearly always built in orthodox Chinese forms. The Muslim Chinese built mosques with the outward form and site plan of a Chinese temple. Minarets became squat pavilions, and it was only in decorative detail that Islamic iconography was clearly expressed (FIG. 8). This outward conformity stood in sharp contrast to the simple interiors of the mosques, which maintained an orthodoxy that contrasted with the ornate statuary and gilded columns of typical Chinese temple interiors.

The non-Chinese peoples had relatively little influence upon Chinese monumental architecture within the frontier cities. The non-Chinese people did, however, have some influence on Chinese vernacular architecture in the frontier areas. In some regions Chinese settlers adapted to local customs and resources, building, for example, two-story wooden houses in a similar manner to the Tibetans in some settlements along the Gansu-Tibet borderland. In some cities Chinese residents also adopted local non-Chinese decorative styles such as the elaborately carved wooden door frames of Xining, which were decorated with flowers carved in the style of the Muslim Chinese of Qinghai (FIG. 9).

Beyond architecture and decorative arts, the Chinese were influenced by non-Chinese people in many aspects of daily life, such as the adoption of some foods and handicrafts. Nonetheless, the overall impact of contact with the non-Chinese in frontier urban areas was relatively slight in Chinese people’s daily lives.

More striking intermixing of cultural forms took place among non-Chinese peoples as a result of the borrowing of architectural styles and modes of ornamentation, gifts, and the use of skilled craftsmen of other ethnicities. A classic example of such intermixing is the use of Tibetan roof ornaments to adorn mosques in frontier areas. Tibetan and Mongolian Lama temples are decorated with several types of 0.5-1.5 m. tall roof ornaments quite different from those on Chinese temples. One of these is a spire composed of a succession of shapes: a stylized lotus blossom and several successively smaller globes topped by a bell-shaped ornament. Another type of distinctive Tibetan roof ornament is a slightly tapered cylinder, topped by a domed cap. Both ornaments are usually made in gold or gold-plated metal, embossed with sacred Tibetan sutras. Such ornaments, common throughout the Tibetan culture region, can be seen on the roofs of the Potala palace in Lhasa, the Kumbum Jampa Ling Monastery in Qinghai, and the Xilituzhao Lama temple in Hohhot. Both types of ornaments

**FIGURE 8.** Islamic iconography on the Great Mosque, Hohhot. The Koran is depicted on the left. (Courtesy of Stanford Univ. Press.)

**FIGURE 9.** Wooden door frame on a Chinese house in Xining, with Muslim-carved ornamentation. (Photo by author.)
continue to adorn the roofs of many frontier mosques, such as the Great Mosque in Xining and the Great Mosque in Hohhot (Fig. 10). In Xining the ornaments were a gift from the Kumbum Jampa Ling Monastery to the mosque, and were deemed appropriate for display on the main hall of worship for centuries, despite their non-Muslim origin and character. The lotus-based ornament can also be found rendered in dark gray stone at the peak of the highest roof on the Great Mosque in Hohhot (Fig. 11). The Tibetans have, on occasion, borrowed Islamic modes of decoration as well. Most notable are the elaborate doorways at Kumbum Jampa Ling Monastery in Xining, framed by Muslim Chinese flower carvings (Fig. 12).

FRONTIER CITIES TODAY

Although the tea-and-horse markets have given way to department stores, the Holiday Inn has replaced the caravanserai, and factories stand where nomads once grazed their livestock (Fig. 13), the distinctive multicultural character of Chinese frontier cities persists today both in the official sponsorship of distinctive, if cliché, architectural styles, and in continuing vernacular expressions of non-Chinese culture. This persistence is remarkable in light of the systematic architectural and urban-planning practices which dominated and transformed Chinese urban landscapes during the Maoist period. In the post-Mao period, several fundamental changes in policy and practice have enabled a revival of traditional landscape styles on the frontier.

At the level of officially sponsored architecture (which in China includes construction ranging from factories and department stores to government buildings), a revival of interest in
regional architectural styles began in the 1980s. As the Chinese architect Rirui Guo explained, “the root of architectural style in non-Han Chinese regions was deeply buried, and . . . it was time to seek this root, to research, study, apply, and develop it.” Other Chinese scholars echoed these sentiments, and a series of meetings in the mid-1980s led to the design of numerous public structures with architectural reference to traditional regionally or culturally specific styles. These architectural references are usually simplified decorative elements, such as yurt- or mosque dome-shaped ornaments placed on top of otherwise nondescript structures (Figs. 14, 15). These efforts have met with mixed success. While they are certainly a contrast to the previous monotony of Soviet-influenced block construction, they rarely satisfy the desire of local residents to see their culture represented in the landscape. One elderly Muslim resident of Urumqi remarked to me, while looking up at the dome-shaped ornaments atop the government center of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (refer to Fig. 14), that he could not understand why they would bother to put a mosque on top of the building when those who occupy the building are not Muslim. In his view, this architectural gesture had no substance.

While the official, monumental approach to the reassertion of culturally distinct landscapes in Chinese cities has met with mixed success, however, there has been a revival of cultural expression in vernacular landscapes. This has been enabled not only by official tolerance of divergent architectural styles, but also by the official tolerance of religion in China in the post-Mao era. Religious organizations have been permitted, within limits and subject to ever-changing political climates, to rebuild and restore religious edifices, and it is in this realm that the most visible vernacular expressions of non-Han culture are evident in China today. In many cases there is little or no government funding or professional architectural expertise available for the restoration of mosques and temples, and communities have resorted to their own design and construction techniques. While Tibetan Buddhists have tended to rebuild their temples in traditional forms, some Chinese Muslim communities have chosen to introduce new, more culturally-distinct designs in mosque reconstruction. Whereas in the pre-1949 era many Chinese Muslim mosques in the northwestern frontier regions were architecturally similar to Chinese temples, in the post-Mao era, many communities are choosing to create mosques more reminiscent of Central Asian architectural styles. These are rarely executed with much sophistica-
tion, and their inexpensive materials tend to deteriorate rapidly. Nonetheless, they are exuberant expressions of difference in an otherwise homogenous landscape (fig.16).

There are fewer ethnic enclaves in Chinese cities today than there were in 1949. Nearly fifty years of residential assignments by employers and the construction of modern apartment buildings have eroded the distinctive neighborhood differentiation which once characterized Chinese cities. Yet, on the frontier, there is also a high degree of persistence in neighborhood diversity. This derives, in part, from the fact that non-Han residents of cities such as Urumqi, Hohhot, Xining and Lanzhou were often left in their traditional neighborhoods, while most new housing was assigned to the thousands of people relocated from eastern China to the frontier to promote industrial growth and development.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of many centuries the highly developed traditions of Chinese urbanism were exported to the inland frontiers not only as monumental constructs of stone and wood which formed the basic structure of each settlement, but also as spatial expressions of power and cultural relationships within multicultural frontier cities. Centuries of Chinese urban design and architectural experience were replicated and faithfully executed by the military personnel who supervised the construction and administration of the frontier outposts. Yet, especially outside the central walled Chinese urban core, frontier cities also displayed expressions of cultural diversity that were visible in their structure and morphology. This diversity was expressed through the congregation of peoples into distinct districts; through functional differentiation by cultural affiliation; through the formation of culturally distinct neighborhood landscapes; and through the cross-cultural diffusion of life-styles, architecture, decorative motifs, and landscapes. The absence of non-Chinese features from much of the monumental landscapes of the urban centers is evidence of the power of the Chinese to maintain their culture even at far remove from their core area. At the same time the frontier cities, especially in non-Chinese neighborhoods, exemplify the ability of minority communities to maintain aspects of their own urban architectural landscape and life-styles, despite cultural, social and economic domination by the Chinese.

This article began with a portrayal of Urumqi as a sharply divided community, with the gate between the Chinese and Muslim settlements viewed as a gate between heaven and earth. Yet other observers have seen a different side to Urumqi’s multicultural character. In 1774 the Qing dynasty poet Yuan Qun wrote of a visit to Urumqi: “the buildings are systematically arranged like the scales of a fish,” and “the diverse peoples converge like the spokes of a wheel.” Like the spokes of a wheel, which maintain separate identities which are evident upon close inspection but blur from a distance, the neighborhoods and peoples of Urumqi have simultaneously affirmed the dominance of the Chinese urban model and expressed their own identities in the landscape.

REFERENCE NOTES

2. The Chinese core area — the heartland of Chinese culture and civilization in the Late Imperial era — covered approximately one-third of the land area of contemporary China, roughly from 105 degrees east longitude eastward to the coasts, and southward to about 22 degrees latitude and northward to about 42 degrees latitude. For a discussion of the role of cities in China’s frontier regions, see G.W. Skinner, ed., The City in Late Imperial China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp.319-22.
3. The author conducted one year of fieldwork in these cities in 1987-1988, supported by the Committee on Scholarly Communications with China and the Fulbright DORA Program, and bases the discussion on both that fieldwork and consultation of historical sources.
5. Steinhardt, Chinese Imperial City Planning, pp.814-147,160-61,171.
Chinese Walled Cities.” Also see Gaubatz, Beyond the Great Wall.


11. Muslim Chinese, referred to by the government of the PRC as Hui, are peoples of Chinese origin who practice Islam. They are considered a distinct ethnicity (minority nationality) in China today. See Gladney, Muslim Chinese, for the complex definitions of Muslim Chinese identity.


17. For example, while about 84 percent of all the cities in a survey of 213 Qing-dynasty cities planned were oriented southward, this figure rose to as much as 97 percent when limited to frontier cities. And while 61 percent of all cities in the same survey had square or rectangular central walled areas, 97 percent of frontier cities had square or rectangular central walled areas (Gaubatz, Beyond the Great Wall, pp.165-71,321-33).


20. Cities with distinct or walled Manchu settlements (often originally established as military garrisons) included, for example, Fuzhou (Fujian Province), with a neighborhood of 10,000 Manchu in the southwestern corner of the city; Guangzhou, with an unwalled Manchu garrison inhabited by 47,000 Manchu; and Xi'an, Chengdu, Hangzhou, Urumqi, Hohhot, Jiangling (Huabei Province), and others which all had walled Manchu garrisons (Schinz, Cities in China, pp.266,267,272-306,355,450; Gaubatz, Beyond the Great Wall, pp.174-5).


26. For example, while about 84 percent of all the cities in a survey of 213 Qing-dynasty cities planned were oriented southward, this figure rose to as much as 97 percent when limited to frontier cities. And while 61 percent of all cities in the same survey had square or rectangular central walled areas, 97 percent of frontier cities had square or rectangular central walled areas (Gaubatz, Beyond the Great Wall, pp.165-71,321-33).


34. Gladney, Muslim Chinese, pp.96-97.

35. Xining Zhi, pp.1211-14.


37. Ibid., pp.60-61.


42. Michael Bonine has made a study of the precision of mosque orientation in other parts of the Islamic world. (M. Bonine, “Islamic and Middle Eastern Cities: Some Myths and Realities,” paper presented at the Colloquium, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley, 1987.) Zhiping Liu’s published plans of 27 mosques in China indicate 21 which are oriented due west rather than correctly toward Mecca. *(Zhongguo Yisilanjiao Jianzhu (Islamic Architecture of China)) (Urumqi: Xiajiang Renmin Chubanshe, 1985).*


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