

# STUDY AND PUBLICATION OF A COLLECTION OF CHINESE METAL ARTIFACTS WITH ISLAMIC SCRIPTS PRESERVED IN THE BEIJING NIUJIE MOSQUE

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## ABSTRACT

**[AR]** دراسة ونشر مجموعة من التحف المعدنية الصينية ذات الكتابات الإسلامية محفوظة في مسجد نيوجيه ببكين تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى نشر وفحص ودراسة مجموعة لم تنشر من قبل لأربعة من التحف المعدنية الصينية ذات الكتابات الإسلامية والمحفوظة في مسجد نيوجيه، أقدم مسجد في بكين. تعود هذه الأواني إلى عصر أسرتي مينغ (1368-1644م) وتشينغ (1644-1912م) الحاكمة للصين، مؤرخة بخراطيش كتابية تحمل أسماء كل من الإمبراطور شواندا (1425-1435م) والإمبراطور جياتشينغ (1796-1820م) والإمبراطور كانغشي (1661-1722) والإمبراطور تشيان لونغ (1735-1796). تحاول هذه الدراسة شرح الأساليب الفنية والمواد الخام الخاصة بالمجموعة، وكذلك الزخارف التي اتسمت بالثراء والتنوع، كما تسعى الدراسة إلى استكشاف تاريخ المسلمين الصينيين عبر فحص تلك المجموعة؛ إذ حوت إحدى التحف على نص صيني يشير إلى علاقة البلاط الصيني بالمجتمع المسلم المحلي في مدينة بكين؛ لذا فهذه التحف تعد وثائق مهمة تسجل مرحلة مهمة في تاريخ الإسلام في الصين خلال عصر أسرتي مينغ وتشينغ. تسبب كلا من الطلب الخارجي والداخلي على هذا النوع من الفن الذي يحمل الكتابات العربية والصينية في انتشاره في الصين، وهو دليل لا يرقى إليه الشك على عظم التأثيرات الفنية المتبادلة بين الفنون الصيني الإسلامي، وإشارة تؤكد على أن الفن الإسلامي تجاوز الحدود حتى وصل إلى أقصى شرق آسيا..

**[EN]** This study aims to publish, examine and study a group of four Chinese Islamic metal artifacts preserved in Niujié Mosque, the oldest mosque in Beijing. These artifacts date back to the Ming (1368-1644 AD) and Qing (1644-1912 AD) dynasties. They are dated by cartouches bearing the names of Emperors Xuanda (1425-1435 AD), Jiaqing (1796-1820 AD), Kangxi (1661-1722 AD), and Qianlong (1735-1796 AD). This study attempts to explain the artistic methods and raw materials of the collection, as well as the decorations that were characterized by richness and diversity. The study also seeks to explore the history of Chinese worshippers through examining that group. One of the objects contained a Chinese text referring to the Chinese court's relationship with the local Muslim community in the city of Beijing. Therefore, it is an important document that records an important stage in the history of Islam in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Both external and internal demand for this type of art that carries Arabic and Chinese writings caused its spread in China, which is indubitable evidence of the great mutual artistic influences between the Chinese and Islamic arts, and an indication that confirms that Islamic art crossed borders until it reached Far East Asia.

**KEYWORDS:** Arabic inscription, Chinese Muslims, Chinese, Incense Burner, Ming-Qing, Niujié.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This study aims to extrapolate the contents of the inscriptions and decorations of Chinese Islamic bronze and its decorative elements, and it is an attempt to understand the intellectual and symbolic implications of the Chinese Muslim artist. The study also seeks to monitor the political conditions and circumstances during which these types of bronzes were produced, and to reveal the general artistic features of Chinese Islamic art. Muslim historians recorded texts from which we can deduce the extent of their artistic skill in the arts<sup>1</sup>.

### Pre Ming-Qing Period

Metal artifacts have a great importance in Chinese arts; the use of bronze dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries BC during the Xia dynasty (2070-1600 BC)<sup>2</sup>. During the Shang dynasty, large numbers of bronze vessels were produced for courts ceremonies<sup>3</sup>, which were known as the Bronze Ritual Groups, *qingtongqi* (中国青铜器)<sup>4</sup>; this type of bronze gained this name because the largest number of them was found in tombs to serve the deceased in meeting their daily demands in the other world<sup>5</sup>. The historical importance of this type is due to the fact that they contained the first examples of Chinese script<sup>6</sup>, it is a huge collection of approximately 12,000 pieces that included bells, boilers, pots and others<sup>7</sup>. During the Han dynasty, bronze was replaced by iron; most metal tools were made of iron<sup>8</sup>. In the Tang dynasty, bronze such as mirrors, jars, dippers, and ewers, were found in tombs<sup>9</sup>.

### Ming-Qing Period

During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD), metal vessels were produced in large quantities and were exported abroad along with porcelain, weaving, etc<sup>10</sup>. During the reign of Emperor Hongwu (1368-1398 AD), the Ming court established eight bureaus entrusted with agriculture, production and administration; one of these bureaus was the bureau of Metalwork. Each bureau was headed by nine chiefs, followed by a number of

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<sup>1</sup> Sulaiman al-Tajir (9<sup>th</sup> century AD) mentioned «The Chinese are the best in the arts; no other nation can compete them». ĀL-TĀĠĪR & ĀL-SIRĀFI 1994: 75. Ibn al-Faqih (10<sup>th</sup> century) recorded «the Chinese are proficient in the arts». IBN AL-FAQĪH 1996: 436.

Al-Marwazi (d.1124-1125), recorded «They are the most skilled people in handicrafts and none other nation rivals them». AL-MARWAZĪ 1942: 3. Ibn Battuta (d. 1369), quoting from his words «The Chinese are the most skillful artificers, and this is what is known about them. Many people described them in their classifications, and bragged about them». IBN BATŪTH 1992: 630.

We are quoting al-Nuwīrī (d.1333) «The Arabs refer to any glass curio as Chinese because of the skill of Chinese in making curios». AL-NUWĪRĪ 2004: 399.

<sup>2</sup> DEYDIER 2015: 11.

<sup>3</sup> BAGLEY 1999: 167.

<sup>4</sup> ÍMNG & YÀ 2008: 6.

<sup>5</sup> RAWSON 2007: 44-60; DEYDIER 2015: 12.

<sup>6</sup> XIGUI 2000: 60; JĪN & ZHÙ 2007: 17.

<sup>7</sup> WILKSON 2000: 428.

<sup>8</sup> WANG 1982: 122-123.

<sup>9</sup> KARETZKY 1996: 129.

<sup>10</sup> LIU 2015: 4.

specialized assistants<sup>11</sup>. During the Qing dynasty, a large number of bronze vessels were produced for use in court ceremonies.

This underscores the significance of bronze, as the Qing court, recognizing the strategic importance of copper, imposed a ban on the use of copper pots from 1726 to 1736 AD. Concerns about scarcity led the court to establish a mineral trade monopoly<sup>12</sup>, particularly for copper, and even prohibited its export overseas<sup>13</sup>.

## II. THE DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

The Museum of Niuji Mosque exhibits four metal artifacts, which do not have identification or accession numbers, and have not been cataloged.

### OBJECT N°.1

**Type:** incense burner

**Material:** bronze

**Dimension:** Height 9 cm, diameter 13.5 cm.

**Date:** the Ming dynasty, reign of the Emperor Xuanda, (1425-1435 AD)

**Inscription position:** sides.

**Inscription language:** Arabic and Chinese.

**Inscription type:** mark.

#### Description

A bronze incense burner with a cylindrical form. The burner was cast with a globular body rising to a neck and rim, supported on three short feet. The exterior is cast with three ogival cartouches with Arabic inscription in relief that reads: «أفضل الذكر» The most virtuous supplication is, «لا إله إلا الله» There is no God but Allah, and «محمد رسول الله» Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.

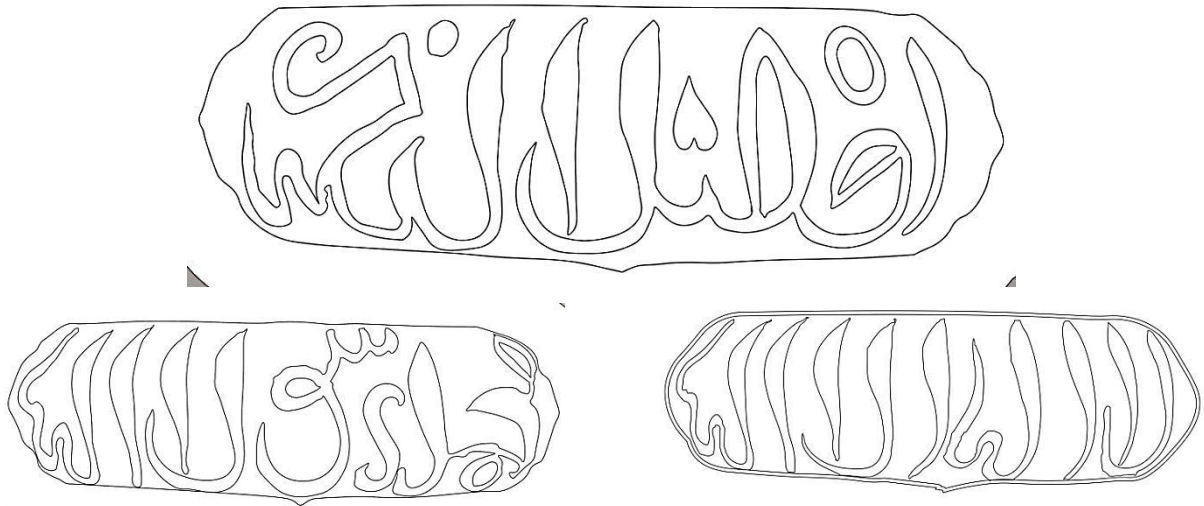


[FIGURE 1/A]: Object N°.1, Incense burner, Xuanda reign (1425-1435 AD) © Photos taken by the researcher

<sup>11</sup> SHIH-SHAN 1996: 32.

<sup>12</sup> MOLL-MURATA 2018: 95.

<sup>13</sup> ZHUOFEN 2000: 265-288.



[FIGURE 1/B]: Arabic inscription of object N°.1 © Done by the researcher



[FIGURE 1/C]: Chinese inscription of object N°.1 © Done by the researcher

The base features an apocryphal six-character Xuande reign mark set within a recessed panel. The mark is arranged in a square format, with three vertical columns starting from the right side, each containing two Chinese characters. The inscription on the mark reads «Dà míng xuān dé nián zhì» 大明宣德年製, which is translated as follows: «Made during the Xuande reign of the Great Ming dynasty». This method of dating is the typical formula in Ming dynasty<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> PIERSON 2007: 60.

OBJECT N°.2

**Type:** incense burner

**Material:** bronze

**Dimension:** Height: 8 cm; diameter: 14.5 cm.

**Date:** the Ming dynasty, reign of the Emperor Xuanda (1425-1435 AD)

**Inscription position:** sides.

**Inscription language:** Arabic and Chinese.

**Inscription type:** mark.

**Description**

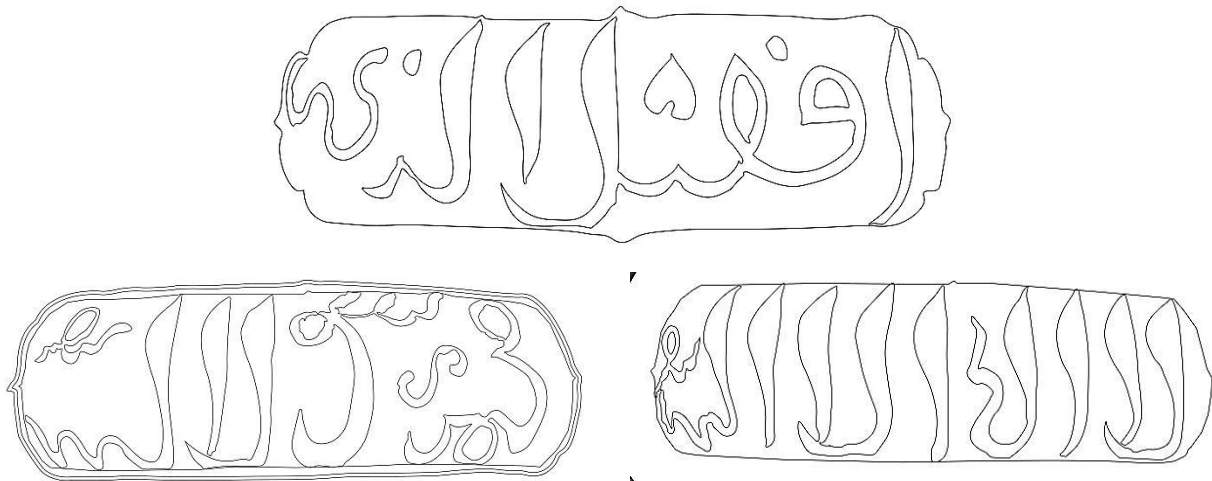
The bronze incense burner exhibits the distinctive li (鬲) shape, featuring a compressed globular body poised on three short tapered feet. The design is characterized by three clustered bulges. This type of bronze vessel was used for cooking meat and grains. Its shape is conducive to rapid heating, as the design of the bowl enables the fire to reach the largest possible surface area of the vessel in a relatively short period of time<sup>15</sup>.



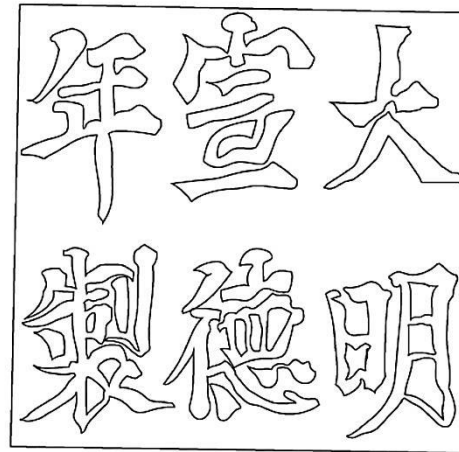
[FIGURE 2/A]: Object N°.2, Incense burner, Xuanda reign (1425-1435 AD)

© Photos taken by the researcher

<sup>15</sup> DEYDIER 2015: 66.



[FIGURE 2/B]: Arabic inscription of object N°.2© Done by the researcher



[FIGURE 2/C]: Chinese inscription of object N°.2 © Done by the researcher

The outer surface is adorned with three ogival cartouches bearing raised Arabic script. Each cartouche features a distinct Arabic inscription in relief: «الذكر أفضل» The most virtuous supplication is, «الله إلا إله لا» There is no God but Allah, and «الله رسول محمد» Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. The base is decorated with an apocryphal six-character Xuande reign mark within a recessed panel. The mark is the Six-character Xuande mark arranged in a square with three vertical columns starting from the right side. Each column consists of two Chinese characters; the inscription reads *Dà míng xuān dé nián zhì* 大明宣德年製 which is translated as follows as: Made during the Xuanda reign of the Great Ming dynasty. This dating formula is typical of the Ming dynasty<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> PIERSON 2007: 60.

OBJECT N°.3

**Type:** Incense burner lantern

**Material:** bronze

**Dimension:** Height 205 cm, diameter 75 cm.

**Date:** 1798, the Qing dynasty, reign of the Emperor Jiaqing (1796-1820 AD)

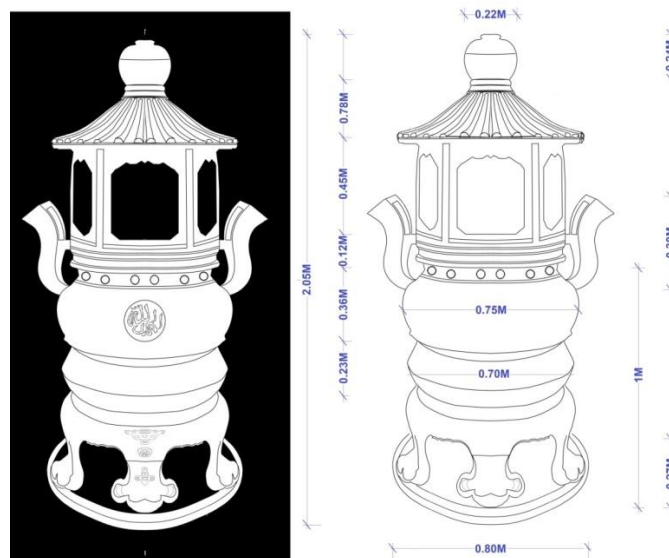
**Inscription position:** sides.

**Inscription language:** Arabic and Chinese.

**Inscription type:** mark.

**Description**

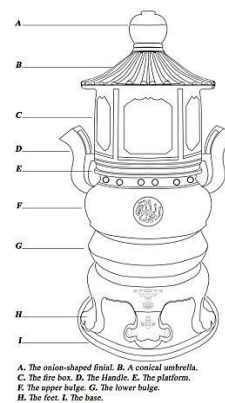
A bronze incense burner lantern, which is styled like a Chinese Temple Censer. The general shape is characterized by its shoulders, swollen belly, and circular bottom that is supported by three legs. It has symmetrical, large ears on the shoulders, with rectangular holes in them. It has a circular base based on five cloud «Ruyi» feet. The body consists of three clustered bulges. Each bulge has a different diameter, and above the bulges is the fire box standing on a platform. The fire box is topped by a conical umbrella. The finial edge is formed in an onion-shape. On both sides of the body, there is a pair of handles integrated into the upper bulge.



[FIGURE 3/A]: Object N°.3. The Dimensions of the Lantern burner © Done by the researcher



[FIGURE 3/B]: Object N°.3. Lantern and burner, Jiaqing reign 1796-1820 AD



[FIGURE 3/C]: Object N°.3. The structure of the Lantern burner © Done by the researcher



[FIGURE 3/D]: The Ruyi Feet of object N°.3 © Photo taken by the researcher



[FIGURE 3/E]: The Arabic inscription of object N°.3 © Done by the researcher

The object is decorated with Chinese and Arabic inscriptions. The upper bulge contains two panels, inside each of which is a verse from Surat Al-Fatiha, which reads: «الحمد لله» (All) praise is [due] to Allah, «رب العالمين» Lord of the worlds. The Chinese inscriptions are applied in the form of a strip located between the light basket and the upper bulge. The text inscribed in this area reads, «大清嘉慶三年秋月吉日建造» Da qing jiaqing san nianqiu yue jiri jianzao translated as follow: [made in the fall of the third year of the reign of Emperor Jiaqing of the Qing dynasty, 1798 AD.



[FIGURE 3/F]: Chinese inscription of object N°.3 © Done by the researcher



## Hamada Hagra

The lantern follows the traditional shapes of ancient Chinese lanterns. This shape spread throughout East Asia, from China to Japan. However, the Japanese rendered these shapes in stone instead of metal<sup>17</sup>. The Japanese stone lanterns were known as *Tōrō* (灯笼), while in China they are known as *Dēnglǒu* (灯楼), which means light tower<sup>18</sup>. The lantern shape migrated from China to the Korean Peninsula in later period<sup>19</sup>. This type of lantern was used in temples and gardens, and had many functions. Candles or wicks placed in the firebox indicate that they were used for lighting, but they were also used to burn incense. These lanterns are found in temples and shrines, where they were used at gates, in doorways, or lining the roads leading into the buildings<sup>20</sup>.

### OBJECT N°.(4)

**Type:** Cauldron

**Material:** copper

**Dimension:** Height 92 cm, edge diameter 150 cm, base diameter 70 cm, width of the flange 15 cm, thickness 3 cm.

**Date:** 1702, 1739, Kangxi reign (1661-1722 AD) and Qianlong reign (1735-1796 AD), the Qing dynasty.

**Inscription position:** lip of the cauldron.

**Inscription language:** Arabic and Chinese.

**Inscription type:** no mark.

### Description

A huge copper cauldron follows the Chinese metal pot tradition. The purpose of this type for the Chinese Muslims was to serve the Muslim community and the worshipers during religious rituals such as Mawlid «the observance of the birthday of the prophet Muhammad» and *Lailat al-Qadr* «the Night of Decree» the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan<sup>21</sup>.



[FIGURE 4/A]: Object N°.4, Cauldron, Kangxi reign (1661-1722 AD) © Taken by the researcher

<sup>17</sup> DAVIDSON 1982: 39.

<sup>18</sup> BATES 2014: 478.

<sup>19</sup> GRAYSON 2002: 88.

<sup>20</sup> DAVIDSON 1982: 39.

<sup>21</sup> YUNNING 2008: 185.



[FIGURE 4/B]: Object N°.4. A Chinese inscription dated to 1702 AD, Kangxi reign (1661-1722 AD)  
©Done by the researcher



[FIGURE 4/C]: Object N°.4. A Chinese inscription dated to 1756, Qianlong reign (1735-1796 AD)  
© Done by the researcher

It is a huge pot with a base that measures 70 cm in diameter . The body gradually swells from the base to the top; its inner diameter at the upper edge measures 1.5 m. The cauldron is free of decorations, as well as inscriptions, except for two Chinese texts in lip of the cauldron. The first text reads: *Chì cì libàisì jì dà qīng kāngxī rén wǔ suì rén yín zhāiyuè zào* 勅賜禮拜寺記大清康熙壬午歲壬寅齋月造 [An imperial reward for the Mosque, during the reign of Kangxi Emperor of Great Qing dynasty, the year of Renwu, 1702 AD, on a day in the month of Ramadan]. The second text reads: *Chì cì libàisì jì dà qīng qiánlóng jǐ wèi suì bǐng zǐ zhāiyuè zhòng zào* 勅賜禮拜寺記大清乾隆己未歲丙子齋月重造 [A record of the imperial reward of the Mosque, it has been reinvented [re-casted] during the reign of

Qianlong Emperor of the Great Qing dynasty, on the Ramada Month in both of the year *Jiwei* 己未, dating to 1739 AD, and the year of *Bingzi* 丙子, dating to 1756 AD.

The first inscription indicates that this cauldron was a reward of the Qing court during the Kangxi reign (1661-1722 AD) in 1702 AD, which is how we know it was also cast in this year. While the Qianlong inscription refers to its restoration, the text mentions the word *juzu* «重造», which means «reinvented»; in this context, the word seems to refer to «re-casted». Unlike the Kangxi inscription, the text indicates two dates: 1739 AD and 1756 AD. The original cauldron likely dates from the Kangxi reign (1661-1722 AD) but was damaged twice. Local Muslims recast the cauldron during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1735-1796 AD) in 1739 AD and later in 1756 AD.

### III. THE ANALYTICAL STUDY

#### Manufacturing Techniques

##### Casting

In ancient China, there are many manufacturing techniques including metal mold casting, stone mold casting, clay mold casting, lost wax casting, and ablation casting. From the Tang dynasty to the Qing dynasty, the manufacturing techniques have relied on two main methods: multi-mold casting, and lost wax casting.

##### Multi-Mold Casting

This technical method had several stages: first, the clay mold is made to look like the desired finished product. Then the mold is covered with thin layers of clay up to 15 mm thick. After drying the clay mold the mold body is cut so that to be assembled later. Then the inner core of the mold is made with leaving an empty area that measure between 5 to 15 mm. Finally, liquid bronze is poured into the empty space<sup>22</sup>.

##### Lost Wax Casting

This technique was first used in China around the 5th century BC, in the late Spring and Autumn Period 春秋 (770-476 BC). This method consists of several stages: a wax model is made on a clay core the same size as the desired bronze model. The ornament is then carved by hand or with a stamped seal. Then the liquid bronze is poured into the space between the core and the outer lid causing the wax to dissolve and exit through special openings left in the outer lid by the craftsman. After the metal cools, the mold surrounding the bronze bowl is cut off, resulting in the release of the bronze vessel<sup>23</sup>. It is worth mentioning that this artistic method is also used in the implementation of decorations such as pierced patterns and 3D decorations<sup>24</sup>. However; the incense burners produced during the reign of Emperor Xuanda were the most valuable through the ages because they were decorated using the wax technique<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> DERUI 2011: 127-136; DEYDIER 2015: 16-17.

<sup>23</sup> DEYDIER 2015: 18.

<sup>24</sup> DEYDIER 2011: 127-136.

<sup>25</sup> DERUI & HAIPING 2011: 127-136.

## Chinese Incense Burner

Chinese incense consists of various components with overlap in traditional Chinese herbal medicine. Lakawood-laka wood herb incense, which was extracted from *Phyllanthus emblica* (Indian gooseberry), was most common<sup>26</sup>. This kind of incense was used in China, India, and Southeast Asia<sup>27</sup>, and was one of the most traded commodities between China and Southeast Asia since the Song dynasty and possibly earlier<sup>28</sup>.

The use of incense in China dates back to ancient times, with its religious significance gaining significance and becoming a significant tradition during the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), when it began being imported in large quantities<sup>29</sup>. The invention of Chinese incense burners is attributed to Ding Huan (1<sup>st</sup> century B.C)<sup>30</sup>, the famous Chinese inventor. The oldest historical evidence of their use dates back to the Han dynasty during the reign of Emperor Wudi (141-87 BC); these Incense Burners were molded and pierced with apertures that made the rising smoke of incense appear like mist or clouds, swirling around the peak of a hill; therefore, this style was known as *Boshanlu* (博山爐), or the hill incense burner<sup>31</sup>.

The purposes of incense burners in China were numerous, and so they were also used for traditional Chinese medicine and as insecticides<sup>32</sup>. In addition, candles and incense burners, known as *Xiangzhong* (香鐘), the incense clock, were used in Buddhist temples to indicate the hours of the night<sup>33</sup>. The oldest reference to this function dates back to the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, as it appears in the literary works of the Chinese writer Yu Jianwu (庾肩吾) (487-551 AD)<sup>34</sup>. In addition, the incense burner was an important ritual element; the Chinese Taoist incense burners took the form of hill, known as the hill incense burner<sup>35</sup>. This form was adopted by the Taoists as a visual aid to visualize the sacred mountains that were said to have been inhabited by Taoist immortals<sup>36</sup>. Later, Chinese Buddhists adopted the same form of the censer<sup>37</sup>. Local Chinese Muslims have transferred incense burners and their functions from indigenous Chinese religious sects<sup>38</sup>.

## Chinese Lantern- Censer

A bronze lantern censer from Niujie Mosque is in the style of a Chinese Temple Censer. The structure of this type is consists of many parts as follows [FIGURE 3/B]:

**A. Baoding (寶頂):** The onion-shaped finial.

**B. Chuang ding (幢頂):** the Roof, follows A conical umbrella type, *Xuějiàn xíng* (雪見型).

<sup>26</sup> NEEDHAM 1974: 141; MAIR & KELLY 2015: 222–228.

<sup>27</sup> PRANCE & NESBIT 2005: 246.

<sup>28</sup> NEEDHAM 1974: 141; SOON 2001: 133–149.

<sup>29</sup> NEEDHAM & GWEI-DJEN 1974: 132.

<sup>30</sup> DAY 1998: 366.

<sup>31</sup> ERICKSON 1992: 6-28.

<sup>32</sup> SCHAFER 1963: 155-167.

<sup>33</sup> BEDINI 1963: 1-51.

<sup>34</sup> SCHAFER 1963: 163.

<sup>35</sup> ERICKSON 1992: 6-28.

<sup>36</sup> SCHIPPER et Al. 2000: 37.

<sup>37</sup> RONAN 1985: 281; BEDINI 1994: 28.

<sup>38</sup> DILLON 1999: 77.

C. Dengshi (燈室): The fire box, the main body of the lantern.

D. Shoubing (手柄): The Handle.

E. Chuangshen (幢身): The platform.

F. The upper bulge.

G. The lower bulge.

H. Jiao (脚): The feet.

I. Jichu (基礎): The base.

The lantern follows the traditional shapes of ancient Chinese lanterns, in addition to being made of stone; some lanterns are made of wood, metal and other materials. We can find similar examples of Chinese Temple Censer at Longhua Temple in Shanghai (China) [FIGURE 5/A], Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou (China) [FIGURE 5/B]<sup>39</sup>, Buseoksa Temple in Yeongju (South Korea) [FIGURE 5/C], and at the Penn Museum [FIGURE 5/D]<sup>40</sup>.



[FIGURE 5/A]: Bronze Lantern Incense Burner, Longhua Temple in Shanghai, China.  
龙华寺 (上海):

[https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E9%BE%99%E5%8D%8E%E5%AF%BA\\_\(%E4%B8%8A%E6%B5%B7\)](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E9%BE%99%E5%8D%8E%E5%AF%BA_(%E4%B8%8A%E6%B5%B7)). Accessed on 14/12/2023



[FIGURE 5/B]: A copper lantern in front of the Great Hall of Heroes at Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou, dated 1601. AMIES 2011: 81-82.



[FIGURE 5/C]: Stone lantern at Buseoksa Temple in Yeongju, South Korea,

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stone\\_lantern\\_at\\_Muryangsujeon.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stone_lantern_at_Muryangsujeon.jpg), Accessed on 14/09/2023



[FIGURE 5/D]: A Japanese bronze lantern at the Penn Museum. NISHIMURA 2019: 28-39.

<sup>39</sup> AMIES 2011: 81-82.

<sup>40</sup> NISHIMURA 2019: 28-39.

## Inscriptions

Historically in China, early bronze inscriptions were made by casting while later inscriptions were often engraved after casting the bronze<sup>41</sup>. Although most of the early bronzes of Xia dynasty are completely undecorated, a small number are decorated with one or more horizontal lines, ornaments with small figures or a combination of the two<sup>42</sup>. Later these lines developed into stripes<sup>43</sup>, while the numbers of inscriptions tend to increase over time<sup>44</sup>.

However, the characters in the ancient Chinese bronze inscriptions were arranged in vertical columns, written from top to bottom. This textual arrangement may have been influenced by bamboo books<sup>45</sup>, which are believed to have been the main means of writing in the Shang and Zhou dynasties<sup>46</sup>. No writings were found to have been carried out in a horizontal manner<sup>47</sup>.

It is known that the calligraphy is one of the features of both Chinese and Islamic arts. Though the inscriptions vary, they are only written in Arabic or Chinese. Chinese is the local and official language within China. The Chinese inscriptions help date the artifacts, since official kilns include inscriptions that list the year, dynasty, and the name of the Emperor. Arabic language is the sacred language used by Chinese Muslims, and is a clear indication of the Islamic religion and the culture of Chinese Muslims. Both Chinese and Arabic languages appeared together on all pieces.

## The Content of Inscriptions

The inscriptions of the Niujie collection are written in Arabic and Chinese.

### The Arabic Inscriptions

The Niujie collection includes Arabic inscriptions, which are religious in content; only five phrases appeared as follows:

- «أفضل الذكر» [The most virtuous supplication is] (objects N<sup>os</sup>.1-2 )
- «لا إله إلا الله» [There is no God but Allah] (objects N<sup>os</sup>.1-2)
- «محمد رسول الله» [Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah] (objects N<sup>os</sup>.1-2)
- «الحمد لله» [(All) praise is [due] to Allah] (object N<sup>o</sup>.3)
- «رب العالمين» [Lord of the worlds] (object N<sup>o</sup>.3)

The Niujie collections feature inscriptions of *Quranic* verses; the praise texts, known in Islam as the *Shahada* (the testimony), are supplication that include the phrase «أفضل الذكر» The most virtuous supplication is, «لا إله إلا الله» There is no God but Allah, and «محمد رسول الله» Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. The phrase «لا إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله» There is no God but Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah<sup>48</sup>. It has two parts: «لا إله إلا الله» *There is no*

<sup>41</sup> XIGUI 2000: 60.

<sup>42</sup> DEYDIER 2015: 105.

<sup>43</sup> SOPER 1969: 54-56.

<sup>44</sup> XIGUI 2000: 62.

<sup>45</sup> KEIGHTLEY 1978: 50.

<sup>46</sup> XIGUI 2000: 63; XU 2002: 12.

<sup>47</sup> KEIGHTLEY 1978: 50.

<sup>48</sup> CORNELL 2007: 7-9.

God but Allah, and «محمد رسول الله» Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. The first part is in the *Qur'an* as a part of many verses, but this form is seen in the *Qur'an*<sup>49</sup>. Meanwhile the second example with this form is only present in the *Qur'an*<sup>50</sup>. The *Shahada* is one of the Five Pillars of Islam<sup>51</sup>, and is commonly prefaced by the phrase «أشهد أن» (I bear witness that)<sup>52</sup>. The Recitation of it is the only formal step in conversion to Islam, and is the most common announcement of faith for Muslims<sup>53</sup>.

The collection includes two *Quranic* verses: «الحمد لله» (*All praise is [due] to Allah*, and «رب العالمين» Lord of the worlds<sup>54</sup>. Muslims give special importance to some surahs over others, due to their virtues and benefits. However, Islamic traditions believe that Surah Al-Fatihah is one of the greatest surahs in the *Qur'an*, due to it being recited in full in every *salah* (prayer). It serves as openers for much functional Islamic life, and it has many benefits, in addition to a cure for many diseases, it act as a spirit possession and exorcism<sup>55</sup>.

The Ming dynasty was one of the pioneering eras for Islamic art in China, as pieces of Chinese art with Arabic inscriptions can be found in many museums around the world. Since the Yuan dynasty, the applied arts of Chinese Muslims include Arabic inscriptions and Arabesque motifs<sup>56</sup>. The Niujie collection is decorated with many Arabic inscriptions related to the religion of Islam. We believe that such objects were made for serving the local Muslim communities in China and for export to the Islamic world. These objects also were diplomatic gifts that the Ming dynasty relied on in order to establish political, diplomatic, and economic relations with the countries of the Islamic world<sup>57</sup>, enhancing the fame of the Ming and Qing dynasties<sup>58</sup>. The great maritime voyage during the Ming dynasty was led by Zheng He (d 1433 or 1435 AD), the Chinese Muslim leader to the Islamic world. His fleet carried gold treasure, porcelain, silk, etc. to present as official gifts to the rulers of Islamic countries<sup>59</sup>. The Ottoman *sultan* Selim I (1512-1520 AD) received similar gifts that were decorated with Arabic inscriptions<sup>60</sup>. In addition, Muslim leaders were influential at the Chinese court<sup>61</sup>, and sponsored Islamic arts.

The Bristol Museum and the Hermitage Museum exhibit incense burners that bear Xuande's mark, and is inscribed with the same inscriptions that reads: «أفضل الذكر» The most virtuous supplication is, «لا إله إلا الله» There is no God but Allah, and «محمد رسول الله» Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah [FIGURES 6-7].

<sup>49</sup> Qur'an XXXVII/35, XLVII/19.

<sup>50</sup> Qur'an XLVIII/29.

<sup>51</sup> LINDSAY 2005: 149.

<sup>52</sup> LINDSAY 2005: 140-141.

<sup>53</sup> CORNELL 2007: 7-9.

<sup>54</sup> Qur'an 1/ 2-3.

<sup>55</sup> MUBARAKPURI 2000: 7-8; ABDUL-RAHMAN 2018: 18.

<sup>56</sup> RAWSON 2007: 272-285.

<sup>57</sup> WEN-CHIN 1988: 135-159.

<sup>58</sup> DILLON 2018: 351.

<sup>59</sup> DREYER 2006: 156-157.

<sup>60</sup> LION-GOLDSCHMIDT 1978: 124.

<sup>61</sup> MAMING 2011: 39.



[FIGURE 6]: Xuande's incense burner

© Bristol Museum, [museums.bristol.gov.uk/details.php?irn=10224](https://museums.bristol.gov.uk/details.php?irn=10224), Accessed on 28/ 05/ 2023.



[FIGURE 7]: Xuande's Incense Burners The Hermitage Museum.

© Hermitage Museum, <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/08.+applied+arts/299381>, Accessed on 28/ 05/ 2023.

The Field Museum in Chicago has two metal incense burners [FIGURE 8], inscribed with Arabic and Chinese inscriptions that include the names of Emperor Xuande (1425-1435 AD) and his eunuch Wu Pang-tso. Both date to 1431. Wu Pang-tso was one of the most important officials in the court and headed the Ministry of Works<sup>62</sup>. We must also bear in mind the policy of pragmatism towards Muslims in China that was adopted by the Chinese emperors. This policy was intended to attract and care for Muslims through funding Muslims projects, such as the construction and renovation of mosques<sup>63</sup>. The Field Museum also has a burner that bears the same content [FIGURE 9].



[FIGURE 8]: Xuande's Incense Burners ©Chicago Field Museum

© Field Museum, <https://collections-anthropology.fieldmuseum.org/catalogue/2877243>, Accessed on 28/ 05/ 2023.

<sup>62</sup> LAUFER 1934: 136-139.

<sup>63</sup> HAGRAS 2019: 134-158.



## Hamada Hagra



[FIGURE 9]: Xuande's incense burners © The Field Museum

<https://collections-anthropology.fieldmuseum.org/catalogue/1353356>, Accessed on 28/ 05/ 2023.

During the reign of Emperor Zhengde (1505-1521 AD), Arabic inscriptions began to appear on Chinese metal burners. An incense burner on display in the British Museum inscribed with the Zhengde mark shows that style [FIGURE 10].



[FIGURE 10]: Zhengde's incense burners © The British Museum

[https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=262259&partId=1&searchText=Zhengde+i](https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=262259&partId=1&searchText=Zhengde+i), Accessed on 28/ 05/ 2023

In addition to Chinese metals, Arabic inscriptions also appeared on Chinese ceramics. Chinese porcelain furnaces during the Ming and Qing dynasties manufactured pieces that included Islamic religious symbols and Arabic writing; an example of this is displayed in the Islamic Art Museum in Cairo [FIGURE 11]<sup>64</sup>.



[FIGURE 11]: Xuande's porcelain Burner © Cairo Islamic Art Museum. MOHAMMED 2018: PL.18

<sup>64</sup>This incense burner is dated by Mohammed, Abdel Hamid Abdel Salam to the Qing Dynasty, although it bears the mark of Emperor Xuanda (1425-1435) of the Ming dynasty. MOHAMMED 2018: 67, FIG.18.

## Types of The Arabic Calligraphy

The Arabic inscriptions inscribed on the objects of Niujie collection were applied the Sino-Arabic scripts, which is called the Sini. The Sini is a calligraphic style used in China for the Arabic script, and refers to any type of Chinese Arabic calligraphy<sup>65</sup>. Chinese calligraphers not only inherited the types of Arabic scripts, but also developed the Arabic script<sup>66</sup>. The Sini style spread during the era of the Yuan dynasty since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and developed further during the Ming dynasty. The script is written in a flowing, curvilinear shape<sup>67</sup>, and its letters are characterized by the use of thick and pointed strokes, where the strokes are thick from the top and become pointed at the bottom. It seems that the invention of the Sini by Chinese Muslims is attributed to the influence of ancient Chinese writings, and their admiration for them. Sini calligraphy is written from right to left in vertical rows<sup>68</sup>.

## The Chinese Inscriptions

Chinese text was inscribed in a small panel. With the exception of object N<sup>o</sup>.4, the inscription did not occupy the main areas, but was engraved in the lower part of the base of the object. The contents of the Chinese text differs from its Arabic counterpart in that it is exclusively concerned with recording the date formula. The dating formula of the inscription includes six components: «the ruling dynasty of China, the Emperor's name, the Emperor's period, the era, the month, and the day»<sup>69</sup>.

All objects in the collection that were produced during the reign of the Xuande Emperor adopted a Xuanda standard date formula. Xuanda is the six-characters in a square, formed in three vertical columns starting from the right side. Each consisted of two Chinese characters, the mark is *Dàmíng xuāndé nián zhì*, «大明宣德年製» which is translated as follow: Made during the Xuanda reign of the Great Ming dynasty. This dating formula is typical of the Ming dynasty<sup>70</sup>. This formula was applied in objects N<sup>o</sup>.1 and N<sup>o</sup>.2 [FIGURES 1/C & 2/C]. Object N<sup>o</sup>.3 [FIGURE 3/E], also applied the standard formula of the Jiaqing, *Dà qīng jiāqìng sān niánqiū yuè jí rì*, 大清嘉慶三年秋月吉日 which means: made in the fall of the third year of the reign of Emperor Jiaqing of the Great Qing dynasty, dating to 1798 AD].

Object N<sup>o</sup>.4 was the only one to incorporate a new formula, which combined the Chinese and Islamic calendar systems. Its inscription included the name of Ramadan (the ninth month of the Muslim year) along with the name of the ruling dynasty and the name of the emperor. Additionally, the object referenced two historical events. The first inscription was marked Ramadan 1702 during the Kangxi reign (1661-1722 AD) as follows «*Dà qīng kāngxī rén wǔ suì rén yín zhāiyuè*» (大清康熙壬午歲壬寅齋月) which means: the Great Qing dynasty, the year of Renwu dating to 1702 AD] in the reign of Kangxi Emperor, on a day in the month of Ramadan [FIGURE 4/B]. The second inscription was recorded in

<sup>65</sup> HAGRAS 2016: 206-207.

<sup>66</sup> XUN 2003: 266.

<sup>67</sup> QUENZER et Al. 2014: 103.

<sup>68</sup> HAGRAS 2016: 206-207.

<sup>69</sup> HAGRAS 2019: 134-158.

<sup>70</sup> PIERSON 2007: 60.

Ramadan 1739 during the Qianlong reign (1735-1796 AD). This inscription says: «*Dà qīng qiánlóng jǐ wèi suì bǐng zǐ zhāiyuè*» (大清乾隆己未歲丙子齋月) which is translated as follow: the Great Qing dynasty, on the Ramada Month in both of the year *Jiwei* 己未, dating to 1739 AD, and the year of *Bingzi* 丙子, dating to 1756 AD] [FIGURE 4/C].

The Chinese language was an effective means of communication between the Chinese court and the local Muslims. The imperial edicts and seals were engraved on Islamic art in order to inform the public of the political relationship between the court and Muslims. Object N°.4 was an example on this trend.

### Forms of Inscriptions (Cartouches)

The cartouches of the collection are ogival, rectangle, or square in shape, with a line at one end. The cartouches appear on Chinese and Islamic metal arts and appeared in Iranian artifacts from the 9-10 AH / 15-16 AD centuries<sup>71</sup>. The purpose of engraving inscriptions inside the cartouches was to emphasize that scripts are the main focus of the art work<sup>72</sup>. The Niujie collection presents many forms of cartouches, including medallions, circles and squares. Object N°.4 does not display the inscriptions inside the cartouches but its manufacturer inscribed two inscriptions on the lip of the cauldron.

### Decorations

The Niujie collection is lacking in decorations, so they did not appear in abundance on it. The collection includes medallion motifs and the dragon scales pattern.

### The Medallion Motif

The medallions (*Bukhariya*) are a decorative motif that adopts an oval or round shape. Two similar ornamental elements connect to it from two borders as floral leaves and may be filled with various decorations<sup>73</sup>. The medallions were the main motifs found on Chinese ceramics during Ming and Qing Dynasties<sup>74</sup>. The medallions appear in objects Nos. 1-2.

### The Geometric Motifs

Circles and squares are the only geometric motifs found in the collection. The circles appear only in object N°.3, as a border for the Arabic inscriptions. Meanwhile the squares are used as a border for the Chinese standard date formula, which is inscribed on the base in many objects. The object N°.3 is exclusively decorated with circles, while the square borders are only found surrounding the Emperor's inscription.

### Dragon Scales Motif

The dragon scales design (龙鳞纹) or fish scales pattern is one of the traditional Chinese decorations, which first appeared in the Shang dynasty (1766–1122 BC)<sup>75</sup>. The

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<sup>71</sup> MIHREZ 1971: 43.

<sup>72</sup> HAGRAS 2022: 319-341.

<sup>73</sup> RIZQ 2000: 33

<sup>74</sup> HAGRAS 2022: 319-341.

<sup>75</sup> AMIES: 2011: 69.

dragon appeared in Chinese arts since the Zhou dynasty (1100-221 BC), and subsequently dragon imagery can be found in many examples of Chinese art and architecture. The dragon ranks first in the hierarchy of Chinese heraldry because the Chinese believe that the dragon brings rain and goodwill<sup>76</sup>. Throughout Chinese history, the dragon has been used as an imperial symbol<sup>77</sup>. Additionally, the dragon was a symbol of the archers during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD)<sup>78</sup>. According to Chinese tradition, the dragon is made of 117 scales; 81 of these scales are positive while 36 are negative. Therefore, the scales present both negative and positive factors<sup>79</sup>. This is why dragon scales have been very important symbols in Chinese art.

In addition to being a common decorative pattern found in Chinese applied arts, dragon scales also appeared in Iznik ceramics<sup>80</sup>. Both objects N<sup>os</sup>.1-2 display this decoration, which was used as a ground for the inscriptions within the panels [FIGURE 12].



[FIGURE 12]: Iznik Ceramic © Burrell Collection. Glasgow Museums.  
GOK 2016: 19; UÇAR 2019: 571-593.

### The Ruyi Pattern

The Rui pattern (如意纹) is a traditional decoration in Chinese arts<sup>81</sup>, and its form is a three or five-pointed floral leaf<sup>82</sup> [FIGURE 3/D]. Chinese artworks have used this pattern since ancient times, but were especially common during the Tang (618-907 AD) and Song (960-1279 AD) dynasties. The importance of the Ruyi pattern increased during the Ming and Qing dynasties, serving as a talisman for luck and spiritual serenity<sup>83</sup>.

## IV. THE COLLECTION AS A RECORD OF THE BEIJING'S MUSLIMS HISTORY

The Niujie Collection provides insights into the political situation of local Muslims during the Qing dynasty. The inscriptions of object N<sup>o</sup>.4 includes the phrase «An imperial reward-gift for the Mosque» (敕賜禮拜寺記) [FIGURES 4/B-C]. This text raises questions and inquiries about its content and its relationship with the local Muslim community in

<sup>76</sup> CHOU 1962: 12-24.

<sup>77</sup> SHELACH 2002: 29-40.

<sup>78</sup> LAUFER 1934: 133-147.

<sup>79</sup> ZHAO 1989: 231-246.

<sup>80</sup> GOK 2016: 19; UÇAR 2019: 571-593.

<sup>81</sup> HAGRAS 2016: 203; HAGRAS 2022: 319-341.

<sup>82</sup> MIN & DAYE 1998: 239; GANLANG 2003: 122.

<sup>83</sup> HUNG-WEI 1998: 32.

Beijing, the capital. Before analyze the content of that text, we should briefly review the political situation of Muslims during the Manchu era, as well as the political relationship between Muslims and the Qing court.

Unlike the Ming period, the Qing period witnessed various stages of political changes towards the local Muslims who endured a challenging and arduous period. Despite facing massive rebellions that resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives, many managed to survive.

After the defeat of the Ming army in 1644, the Qing dynasty controlled China under the reign of Shunzhi (1643-1661 AD). The ethnic groups of Chinese Muslims led rebellions against the Manchu rulers, who established a new dynasty in Yunnan Province<sup>84</sup>. The first rebellion was led by Milayin (in the Chinese records, he is known as 米喇印) and Ding Guodong (丁國棟)<sup>85</sup>. During that rebellion many Muslims were killed in Gansu<sup>86</sup>.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Du Wenxiu led an uprising known as the Panthay rebellion (1856–1873 AD). He was able to seize the Yunnan Province and establish himself as *Sultan*, styling himself as «*Sultan of Dali*»<sup>87</sup>. After seventeen years of struggle, the Qing dynasty army was able to defeat him after millions of Muslims were massacred<sup>88</sup>.

In 1845, the Qing army massacred thousands of Muslims in the Baoshan area of Yunnan<sup>89</sup>. In 1856 AD, the Qing officials committed another massacre against Muslims in Kunming, prompting the Panthay rebellion (1856–1873 AD), which is another example of Muslim discontent in China<sup>90</sup>.

Mosques in the Yunnan Province were destroyed<sup>91</sup>, and the number of Muslims decreased dramatically<sup>92</sup>. In the last years of the Qing dynasty, more upheavals occurred. Dungan, the Muslim leader, led a great rebellion to end Qing dynasty rule and establish an Islamic state. This event is known as the Dungan revolt (1895–1896 AD), and is known in Chinese records as 同治回亂. During this rebellion millions of Muslims were killed<sup>93</sup>.

The Niujie Museum sheds light on the content of object N<sup>o</sup>.4, showcasing an imperial decree issued by Emperor Kangxi in 1694 AD, during the thirty-third year of his reign. The decree's text monitors the political relations between local Muslims and the Qing court. It includes quoted passages that provide recorded insights into these relations. «Let all the provinces know that the governor will punish any officials or any of the citizens who make up false tales about Muslims on the flimsy pretext or slander them under the pretext of rebellion. They must be severely punished without consulting the supreme leadership. I invite Muslims to adhere to their religion without violating this order»<sup>94</sup> [FIGURE 13].

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<sup>84</sup> WAKEMAN 1986: 803.

<sup>85</sup> ROSSABI 1979: 191.

<sup>86</sup> LIPMAN 1998: 54; MILLWARD 1998: 171.

<sup>87</sup> ELLEMAN 2001: 64; WHITE 2011: 298.

<sup>88</sup> LESLIE 1986: 256.

<sup>89</sup> ATWILL 2005: 70-77.

<sup>90</sup> FAIRBANK & TWITCHETT 1980: 213; SCHOPPA 2002: 79.

<sup>91</sup> WENHUI 2015: 370-390.

<sup>92</sup> YONGJIA 2008: 162.

<sup>93</sup> ENHAN 1978: 95 -124.

<sup>94</sup> STONE 2002: 34-41; XUN 2003: 229.



[FIGURE 13]: The Kangxi decree, 1694 AD © Photo taken by the researcher

This incident dates back to Ramadan of the year 1105 AH / 1694 AD, when Muslims were worshipping at night and the mosque was filled. Some tried to drive a wedge between the emperor and the Muslims by claiming that the Muslims gather at night and disperse during the day in order to prepare for rebellion. In response, the Emperor secretly went to the mosque wearing traditional civilian clothes to investigate, and found the Imam urging people to do good deeds. When it became clear to him the truth of the matter, the emperor issued this decree<sup>95</sup>.

The Islamic arts in China record the political situation of the local Muslim communities in China, and also cover an important aspect of their daily life and their relations with the ruling Chinese families. In other words, it is an honest mirror that reflects the conditions of Muslims in China. We believe that the inscriptions on the cauldron were the result of the attempt by the local community of Muslims to record their history and heritage in China on the one hand, and to record their political relations with the Chinese court on the other. Therefore, in the second casting during the reign of Qianlong (1735-1796 AD), local Muslims took care to add inscriptions to commemorate the first casting during Kangxi reign (1661-1722 AD).

<sup>95</sup> STONE 2002: 34-41; XUN 2003: 229.

## V. CONCLUSION

The study examined four metal wares from the Ming and Qing dynasties, preserved at the Niujie Mosque in Beijing, China. The study singled out many of the results through the descriptive and analytical studies. The collection presents inscriptions that accurately monitor the political situation of Muslims in China, and their relationship with the Chinese court. These are important objects that record an important stage in the history of Islam in China during Ming-Qing period. The Chinese applied arts with Arabic script were of great importance to the Chinese. On the one hand, it met the needs of local Muslims, and it had an important role in exportation to the Islamic world. On the other hand, the Chinese emperors relied on these objects as gifts to build economic and diplomatic bridges with the rulers of Islamic countries. In other words, the emergence of Arabic scripts on Chinese arts was a result of the pragmatic policy towards Muslims. The study confirmed the extent of the presence and contribution of Islamic art to Chinese civilization and arts. The Muslims in China presented a distinctive art, and produced a new, unique artistic style with the characteristics of both Chinese and Islamic arts. The Islamic arts in China monitor and document the political situation of local Muslim communities in China, and cover an important aspect of their daily life and their relations with the ruling families of China. In other words, it is an honest mirror that reflects the conditions of Muslims in China. The study proved that Chinese Muslims used the standard date formula for Chinese arts, which is marked with the name of the ruling dynasty, followed by the name of the emperor, the year and the month. Furthermore, the study also highlighted that Chinese Muslims had combined both the Chinese and Islamic calendars and inscribed it in the date formula, which was not common in Chinese Islamic arts. Chinese Muslims deliberately decorated their metal arts with Arabic inscriptions, which were treated as the centerpiece of the decoration. Arabic was engraved in the main spaces of the objects, while Chinese inscriptions are placed on the base on a smaller scale. The Arabic inscriptions applied the Arabic-Sini calligraphic style, a type of calligraphy invented by the Chinese Muslims.

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