



China

Last major Arabic-style mosque in China loses its domes

Exclusive: Experts say changes to Grand Mosque of Shadian mark completion of five-year sinification campaign

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The last major mosque in [China](#) to have retained Arabic-style features has lost its domes and had its minarets radically modified, marking what experts say is the completion of a government campaign to sinicise the country's Muslim places of worship.

The Grand Mosque of Shadian, one of China's biggest and grandest mosques, towers over the small town from which it takes its name in south-western Yunnan province.

Until at last year, the 21,000 square metre complex featured a large building topped with a tiled green dome, adorned with a crescent moon, flanked by four smaller domes and soaring minarets. Satellite imagery from 2022 shows the entrance pavilion decorated with a large crescent moon and star made from vivid black tiles.

Photographs, satellite imagery and witness accounts from this year show that the dome has been removed and replaced with a Han Chinese-style pagoda rooftop, and the minarets have

been shortened and converted into pagoda towers. Only a faint trace of the crescent moon and star tiles that once marked the mosque's front terrace is visible.

24 April 2022

22 February 2024

Surrounding
domes
removed

Chinese-style
roof installed

Entrance
altered

Minarets
modified

Guardian graphic. Source: Maxar

Yunnan's other landmark mosque, **Najiaying**, less than 100 miles from Shadian, was also recently had its Islamic features removed in a renovation.

In 2018 the Chinese government **published** a five-year plan on the "sinification of Islam". Part of the plan was to resist "foreign architectural styles" and to promote "Islamic architecture ... that is full of Chinese characteristics". A leaked Chinese Communist party **memo** shows that local authorities were instructed to "adhere to the principle of demolishing more and building less".

Ruslan Yusupov, an anthropologist at Cornell University who spent two years in Shadian doing fieldwork, said: "Sinification of these two landmark mosques marks the success of the campaign. Even if there are small mosques left of Arab style in villages, it will be difficult for local communities to contest their sinicisation".



1,000 km
1,000 miles
Guardian graphic

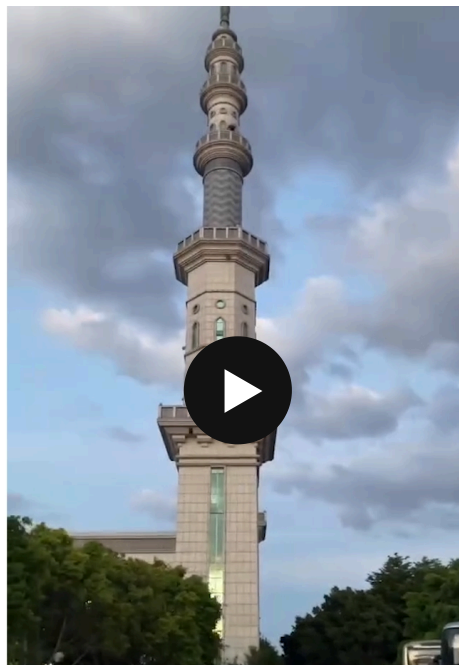
Hannah Theaker, a historian of Islam in China at the University of Plymouth, said the **mosque sinicisation campaign** had progressed “province by province”, with Yunnan, one of the furthest provinces from Beijing, being tackled last. “By 2023, there was a sense among communities that architectural sinicisation would reach the famous Yunnanese mosques, as the last major unsinicised mosques in China.”

Ma Ju, a Chinese Hui activist based in New York, said the renovations were “a clear message to destroy your religion and your ethnicity”.

First built during the Ming dynasty, the Grand Mosque of Shadian was destroyed during the cultural revolution in an uprising known as the Shadian incident, in which the People’s Liberation Army suppressed an uprising of Hui Muslims in the area. More than 1,000 people are estimated to have been killed.

The Grand Mosque was later rebuilt and expanded with government support. Its design was based on the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina, Saudi Arabia, where Muhammad is believed to be buried. It has three prayer halls and capacity for 10,000 worshippers.

Before



The Hui are a Chinese Muslim ethnic minority, most of whom live in western China. There are more than 11 million Hui people, according to the 2020 census, a similar population to Uyghurs.

Yusupov said the development of Shadian and Najiaying mosques represented “the ability of Muslims to regain religious and Islamic space after the cultural revolution. In the Xi Jinping era, the inclusion of Chinese Muslims into the national space happens through their [mosques’] impairment or disfigurement.”

A Hui Muslim who opposed the redevelopment of the mosques said: “Shadian mosque is very important to all Muslims, not just in Shadian. It’s a big loss.

“We just wanted to preserve our last bit of dignity, because except for Shadian and Najiaying, every [mosque] in the country has been remodelled,” said the man, who has since left China and who asked to remain anonymous because of fears for his safety.

One of the Grand Mosque's modifications is the addition of Chinese characters underneath the gold-plated Arabic writing on the front of the building. The Chinese text reads: "The imperial palace of supreme truth", a Taoist term that is also used in Chinese Islam. But it has not been previously associated with Shadian's mosque.



Ian Johnson, the author of *The Souls of China*, a book about religion, said: "Given the tragic history of this mosque - especially that within living memory Han chauvinism already led to its destruction once - the reconstruction and renaming of it is another effort to erase local people's beliefs and their cultural heritage."

In 2014, the Chinese government launched a "strike hard" campaign against Uyghurs, who live mainly in the north-western region of Xinjiang. The policies involved oppressive surveillance measures and harsh punishments for a wide array of expressions of Islamic faith, such as abstention from alcohol or the possession copies of the Qur'an or other Islamic materials.

The campaign eventually led to around a million Uyghurs and other minorities being imprisoned in extrajudicial detention centres, which the UN said may constitute crimes against humanity. The Chinese government has defended its policies as necessary for tackling extremism and separatism.

In 2018, the campaign officially spread to the sinification of Islamic architecture. An analysis published last year [by the Financial Times](#) found that three-quarters of more than 2,300 mosques across China had been modified or destroyed since 2018.

Hui communities have typically been given more latitude than Uyghurs to practise their faith because the government sees them as being better integrated with the Han majority and does not have concerns about Hui separatism. But clashes have occasionally broken out over plans to modify or destroy mosques.

Last year [hundreds of police clashed with protesters](#) at the Najaiying mosque over the planned renovations. The protests were eventually suppressed and the renovations went ahead.



■◀ Protesters clash with police outside Najjiaying mosque in Yunnan China in May 2023 - video

Muslims in Shadian did not stage similar protests when their mosque was closed for sinification last year. That was because they had paid close attention to events in Najjiaying, say former residents.

“Since that time, Shadian people realised that the government has a very strong power to control everything,” said a former employee of the Shadian mosque who left China in 2021. “But people are not happy with the government forcing them to change the mosque style ... Most of my friends have left Shadian. They said we cannot survive.”

The Grand Mosque of Shadian appears to have reopened in April, in time for Eid. A video from inside the prayer hall shows that several surveillance cameras have been installed. In 2020 the mosque management committee refused a request from the authorities to install surveillance cameras, said the former mosque employee.

Five sources with knowledge of the local environment in Shadian said wireless speakers had been distributed to households to broadcast the call to prayer, since public calls are generally banned, raising concerns about surveillance.

China’s mosque sinicisation plan is now considered to be largely completed, but is only part of its plans to mould religion, particularly Islam, to fit with the government’s ideology. In February Beijing **tightened its regulations** on religious expression to ensure that faiths “adhere to the direction of sinicisation”. Several local authorities already ban under-18s from attending mosques, and in Najjiaying, minors are banned from fasting.

“The sinicisation of Islam campaign was never just about the appearance of mosques,” said Theaker, the historian.

Additional research by Chi Hui Lin

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