

Research Article

The Menhuan System and the Unification of Muslim Communities in Western China

Mehad Mousa

School of Country and Area studies, Northwest University, Xi'an,China; mehadmousa@nwu.edu.cn

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Abstract. This study mainly investigates the objectives of the Menhuan system, a unique Sufi organization in western China, to determine its role in unifying Muslim communities in Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai. Using historical analysis, the methods involve examining the cultural, political, and religious factors that shaped the system's development. The research concludes that the Menhuan system was a crucial mechanism for integrating diverse ethnic groups into a cohesive socio-religious framework. A significant finding is that its hierarchical and hereditary nature, while a source of unity, also generated internal tensions. This research further discusses the system's contemporary legacy, underscoring its enduring relevance to modern Chinese Muslim identity and community structures.

Keywords: Sufism, Western China, Islam, Menhuan, Sufi orders.

INTRODUCTION

Sufism has emerged in Islam as a spiritual movement seeking closeness to God through asceticism, contemplation, and practical mysticism. The concept of Sufism, as defined by Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, is as follows:

"It is the surrender of the self to servitude, the attachment of the heart to divine lordship. It involves purifying the heart from the company of creation, abandoning natural dispositions, extinguishing human traits, distancing oneself from base desires, embracing spiritual qualities, attaching oneself to true knowledge, and following the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) in the Sharia. It is the refinement of souls, the purity of the heart, and the rectification of character."

This concept aligns closely with the methodology of Sufism in China. The emphasis on "purification of the heart", "spiritual refinement", and "adherence to the Sharia" resonates with the practices and teachings of Sufi orders in China, particularly within the "Menhuan system". The Menhuan system, while adapting to the local cultural and political context, retained the core principles of Sufism as articulated by al-Ghazali, focusing on spiritual growth, ethical conduct, and the pursuit of divine closeness.

Sufism origins can be traced back to the second century of the Islamic calendar, influenced by the worship and austerity of the early companions and successors of the Prophet. It crystallized as an independent discipline in the third and fourth centuries with figures such as Junayd al-Baghdadi and al-Hallaj. Sufism expanded significantly during the Middle Ages with the emergence of Sufi orders like the Qadiriyya and Shadhiliyya, which played a role in spreading Islam. Despite criticism from jurists, Sufism remained intellectually and spiritually influential, contributing to Islamic arts and literature. In the modern era, Sufism has declined in the face of reformist movements but remains strongly present in Muslim societies. Sufism reached China in the early 10th century, altering the Islamic landscape that had been established among Chinese Muslims since the mid-7th century. Over time, Sufism developed numerous orders, leaders, and followers, with a long history extending from the 10th century to the present. Sufi orders began to emerge in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, gradually forming the "Sufi order" system within Muslim communities, including the Hui ethnic group, in regions such as Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai (western China). The emergence of this system was closely linked to the spread of Sufism in China, the unique geographical location of these regions, the weak control of the Qing government over the local population, and the general cultural poverty and intellectual vacuum in northwestern China. This

system played an important role in unifying the Muslim community in the northwest, though it also had some negative effects.

Sufism and its practices are among the challenging topics for research and investigation in China. Some Western scholars, such as Marshall Broomhall in his book "Islam in China"(1910), have explored the general history of Islam in China, touching briefly on the role of Sufi orders in spreading Islam. Micheal Dillon, in his book "the chinese hui muslims: A study in Religious syncrestism"(1996), discusses the Hui Muslim community, focusing on their engagement with Sufi practices and their impact on religious customs. Dru C.Gladney (1996) in his book"Muslim Chinese:Ethnic Nationalism in the people's Republic"(1996), attempted to explore the ethnic and religious identity of the Hui Muslims in China, discussing the role of Sufism in shaping this identity. David Witslerlund, in his study "Sufism in China: The Spread of Mystical Traditions in a Globalized World" (2004), examines the spread of Sufism in China and the impact of globalization on Sufi practices among Chinese Muslims. Among the rich studies on Sufism in western China is Professor Tian Fei's book "The Voice of Salvation: Gender, Media, and Sufism in China"(2022), which provides an ethnographic study of the Jahriyya and Naqshbandiyya orders, highlighting the relationship between language and the tensions of modernity. Other Western studies have also explored various Sufi orders across China. Chinese scholars have also shown interest in studying the history of Islam in general and Sufism in particular, especially since Sufism in China has developed unique Chinese characteristics. Islam in China has been deeply influenced by Chinese culture, making it distinct from Middle Eastern Islam. While these foundational studies provide valuable historical and ethnographic context, a clear gap remains in specifically explaining the unique regional formation and the subsequent socio-religious consequences of the Menhuan system in western China.

This research focuses on the emergence of Sufi orders, particularly in western China. Islam entered China in 651 CE, according to Chinese records, and Sufism arrived in the early 10th century in Xinjiang, spreading throughout China by the 16th century. Sufism underwent numerous changes in China due to varying political and religious conditions, branching into more than forty orders. In China, Sufi orders are known as "Menhuan." The Menhuan system is a form of Islamic religious organization in China that emerged under the guidance of Sufi theories and was based on the Sufi spiritual mentor-ship system. It absorbed traditional Chinese culture and integrated it, influenced by the unique geographical environment of northwestern China, gradually evolving into a distinct Chinese Islamic model. By the late Ming and early Qing dynasties (1500–1600), the spread of Sufism in Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai Provinces directly led to the emergence of the Menhuan system. However, given the broader spread of Sufism at the time, why did similar organizational forms not emerge in other regions? And why did this system later lead to significant social unrest within the Muslim community? Addressing these

pivotal questions is the primary purpose of this study. Its significance lies in moving beyond descriptive history to provide a concentrated analysis of the causal factors behind the Menhuan's unique development.

This research explores the multiple reasons for the emergence of the Menhuan system in these regions and its impacts from various perspectives. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute a more nuanced and explanatory framework to the existing scholarship, clarifying how the interplay of doctrine, local culture, and state power produced a system that was both unifying and internally divisive.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a historical-analytical methodology to trace the development and socio-political adaptation of Sufi orders (menhuan) in China. The study integrates evidence from archival, textual, and ethnographic sources to construct a multi-layered analysis. Primary sources include internal menhuan genealogical manuscripts (jiapu), hagiographies of Sufi saints (awliya), mosque records from key Sufi centers in Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia, and petitions from Qing and Republican-era archives that document interactions between Sufi leaders and the state.

These are supplemented by the doctrinal texts of major Sufi orders, such as the Jahriyya, Khufiyya, and Qadiriyya, which illuminate their distinct spiritual practices and theological orientations. Secondary scholarship—including the foundational works of Ma Tong, Jonathan Lipman, and Dru Gladney—provides essential contextual framing and theoretical grounding.

The analytical framework is guided by the concepts of religious institutionalism and adaptive resistance. This lens is used to examine how the menhuan developed durable, hierarchical institutions that combined spiritual lineage with temporal power, and how they strategically navigated relations with imperial, warlord, and modern state authorities to ensure their survival. By focusing on the interplay between mystical theology, communal identity, and political negotiation, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of Sufism's unique trajectory and its role in the indigenization of Islam within the Chinese context.

The Menhuan System: Structure and Function

The term "Menhuan" has an original meaning in the Chinese language but has acquired Islamic cultural connotations. Linguistically, it refers to someone of prestige and status, associated with the feudal system that prevailed in feudal China, which began during the Warring States period (475 BCE) and was completely abolished after the establishment of modern China between 1951 and 1952. Over time, the concept evolved in the minds of Chinese Muslims to mean a Sufi order, which is somewhat related to the feudal concept of inheriting leadership from a master to his disciple or son, passing from one generation to the next, much like the

transfer of power and authority in feudal society. Chinese Sufi orders crystallized in the 17th century, blending with local cultural concepts to form various orders and groups characterized by specific traits, such as the absolute veneration of the order's leader, the belief that the leader can guide his followers to paradise, and the inheritance of the order within the leader's family (though some orders allow inheritance outside the family). The veneration of shrines or places associated with the order's leaders and the subordination of multiple mosques in a region to the leadership of the order's leader, who appoints imams and muezzins, clearly reflect the political characteristics of feudal Chinese society, with its hierarchical structure of rulers and ruled. This structural analysis aligns with Gladney's (1996) argument that religious authority in China often mirrors state bureaucratic models, creating what he terms "ethnoreligious patriarchs" (Gladney, 1996: 112).

The Emergence of the Menhuan System

The unique geographical location of Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai area played a significant role in the emergence of Islamic culture and the Menhuan system. These regions, located in northwestern China, are geographically connected and historically belonged to the same administrative unit until they were divided into three separate administrative units in the 1920s due to political, economic, and military factors. Jonathan Lipman (1997) aptly describes this zone as a "transitional, interactive frontier" where Chinese and Central Asian cultures met and melded (Lipman, 1997: 28). Culturally and geographically, these regions are separated from other Chinese provinces by mountain ranges, while the Yellow River flows through them, linking their economy and culture closely and making them a distinct cultural-geographical unit. The region's diverse terrain, including the eastern sedimentary plateau, the western Tibetan Plateau, and the Qilian Mountains, creates a natural landscape of mountains, basins, rivers, and valleys. The continental climate, due to the region's inland location and high altitude, results in varied vegetation, ranging from forests to arid grasslands and alpine meadows.

The geographical unity of these regions facilitated the migration of various ethnic groups, each seeking a suitable environment for development, leading to a mixed settlement pattern of different ethnicities. The region's topography made it a meeting point between China's agricultural civilization and Central Asia's pastoral civilization, creating an interactive environment where neither culture could fully dominate the other. Over centuries of historical interaction, a multicultural model emerged in this region, combining Buddhist, Islamic, and Confucian cultures. These three religious cultures interacted and influenced each other at different historical stages, with Buddhism dominating for most of the period. Buddhism's early arrival in western China deeply influenced Islamic culture, while Confucianism's influence came later, towards the end of the Qing dynasty in the late 18th century. The dominance of local culture over Islamic culture during this period until the early 16th

century was due to the government's policy of "ruling according to local customs," which began during the Yuan dynasty and peaked during the Ming and Qing dynasties. This policy hindered the growth of non-Buddhist minority cultures. However, after the Qing government consolidated control over Tibet following the Lobsang Danjin rebellion, it imposed strict restrictions on Tibetans in the Hehuang region, limiting their movement and reducing the influence of Buddhist monasteries. These measures gradually diminished the dominance of Tibetan Buddhism, which had long overshadowed other minority cultures, including Muslim minorities. This cultural shift allowed Islamic culture to rise and fill the void left by the decline of Tibetan Buddhism and the inability of Confucianism to do so. One reason for Confucianism's failure to fill this void is that it is not a religion in the same sense as Buddhism or Islam but rather a set of social, political, and ethical norms governing relationships within society and between individuals and the government.

The Political Climate for the Development of the Menhuan System

Since the introduction of Islam to China and the emergence of its various schools of thought, successive Chinese governments have adopted flexible policies towards Muslims. Most Muslims were engaged in trade and were paying significant taxes to the government, leading to the formation of distinct Muslim communities. Early Muslim communities were referred to as "Fanke," meaning foreign guests. Despite changes in government policies, the overall approach towards Muslims remained consistent, though tax rates fluctuated based on economic conditions. During the early Qing dynasty, the government continued to use local rulers in western China, a system characterized by its policy of accommodating different ethnicities and religions and indirect control. In feudal China, powerful families played a significant role but relied on government authority to maintain their positions as local rulers. The Qing government granted these families local authority to leverage their influence in maintaining administrative order in various regions.

However, after the Qing dynasty stabilized, the power of local rulers began to wane, drawing the attention of the central government. The government attempted to reassert control over the western regions through taxation, requiring landowners to register their agricultural lands in official records for tax purposes. It also restructured the titles and roles of local rulers, most of whom were Buddhists or high-ranking temple priests, reducing their local influence. These rulers retained only their titles, and with their declining power, Buddhism's influence also waned. Meanwhile, the Salar Muslim community continued to grow in strength, resisting government policies. At the same time, the Qing government sought to integrate all minority populations into a unified registration system to enhance administrative control over the region.

Nonetheless, the practical implementation of these policies, combined with the weakening of local Buddhist rulers, led to a genuine decline in government

control over these areas. The inhabitants of these regions, whether Muslim or not, were deeply influenced by the harsh natural environment, which shaped their resilient and rebellious character. The region's mountainous and arid terrain made governance difficult, and officials often lacked a deep understanding of the area, leading to frequent changes in leadership and ineffective control. With the decline of local Buddhist rulers and the weakening of central government control, Muslim authority expanded in the region, and Islamic political influence grew. This political vacuum provided the perfect conditions for the emergence of various Sufi orders, as Sufi leaders took advantage of the chaos caused by the changing local rulers to restructure Muslim society from within. This analysis supports Dillon's (1996) observation that the Qing state's "fragmented control" in the frontier regions created spaces for alternative socio-political structures to flourish (Dillon, 1996: 89).

The Internal Islamic Climate for the Development of the Menhuan System

By the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, as various Sufi orders began to spread, there was a significant decline in Islamic thought and religious education. This decline alarmed Muslim scholars, imams, and intellectuals, who feared the loss of religious knowledge and initiated reform efforts within the community. These efforts provided an opportunity for the spread of Sufi thought and its orientations among Chinese Muslims, creating a conducive environment for the formation of various Sufi groups. While scholars sought to unify the Muslim community, doctrinal deviations that emerged in the late Ming dynasty led to clear and numerous divisions. Scholars differed in their interpretations of Islamic law, leading to the emergence of various factions that accused each other of heresy, resulting in intense conflicts within the Chinese Muslim community. The Qing central government exploited these conflicts by applying a "divide and rule" policy, fueling disputes among Sufi leaders and creating religious and ethnic tensions, particularly between the Han and Hui communities.

Muslim intellectuals attempted to organize Islamic teachings and respond to religious groups that spread innovations among the local population. The Muslim community in western China was isolated from the broader Islamic world, whether in Central Asia or the Arab heartlands. However, the Qing government's relaxation of travel restrictions allowed many scholars and imams to undertake pilgrimages to the Arabian Peninsula and visit various Arab countries. They returned with Sufi ideas that they spread upon their return to China. Additionally, Sufi leaders from various parts of East Asia, Persia, and the Arab world came to China to preach and spread their Sufi methods. This contributed to the emergence of the Menhuan Sufi system in western China.

During this period, some Sufi groups, known as "tariqas" or "methods," began to form. These tariqas were considered organized spiritual paths that helped followers purify their souls and draw closer to God. Although these Sufi groups were

classified as religious organizations, they were not strictly formal but rather spiritual methods followed by disciples under the guidance of a sheikh. In Central Asia and some Arab countries, Sufi orders entered a new phase of development in the 15th century, gradually transforming into more rigid systems known as "tariqas," characterized by the absolute submission of followers to the sheikh's will. This led to the emergence of more organized Sufi groups with collective rituals and administrative structures, as well as the pursuit of wealth and worldly influence. In China, the Menhuan system appeared relatively late, with its beginnings in the early 17th century. Compared to the situation outside China, where Sufi orders had already entered the "tariqa" phase, the Menhuan system in China skipped the early stages of Sufi development and began directly with the more rigid tariqa phase. Although the initial spread of Sufism in China involved various methods, this was merely a foundational step necessary for the crystallization of different intellectual trends. The tariqa phase began immediately afterward, with the principle of absolute obedience to the sheikh becoming the cornerstone of its organizational structure. This rapid institutionalization distinguishes the Chinese Menhuan from its Middle Eastern counterparts, a point emphasized by Israeli (2002) in his study of Islamic institutionalization in China (Israeli, 2002: 155).

This principle laid the intellectual and organizational foundation for the development of the Menhuan system, contributing to the formation of its various models, whether the more developed intellectual model like the Jahriyya or the simpler general model represented by the Qadiriyya. Thus, the Menhuan system became a key factor in achieving internal cohesion within the Muslim community in western China, making it a distinctive religious and social system within the local Islamic framework.

The Socio-Cultural Climate for the Emergence of the Menhuan System

Before the emergence of the Menhuan system, the Muslim community in western China suffered from a lack of Islamic knowledge and religious culture. As previously mentioned, the emergence of Islamic schools of thought in China only occurred after the spread of Sufism in the early 17th century. Prior to the spread of Sufism and its schools in western China, Chinese Muslims followed the fundamentalist approach, the first Islamic method introduced to China since the arrival of Islam. Chinese Muslims initially followed the religious practices of the early Arab and Persian Muslims who traveled to China via the Silk Road, both maritime and overland, since the 6th century CE. Over time, the original culture of the Muslim community was influenced by the local Han Chinese culture, leading to a blending of Muslim and Han cultures, which carried many Taoist and Buddhist concepts. This made Islamic culture fragile and weak among the general Muslim population, except for religious and cultural elites.

On the other hand, while various religious methods emphasized the absence of fundamental differences in religious approach among different social classes, a basic fact often overlooked is the gap between the elite and the general public in terms of religiosity. The elite often express their religiosity through intellectual reflections and the expression of religious values or through behaviors reflecting the social justice governed by those values. In contrast, the general public's religiosity is manifested in adherence to ethical behavior and formal religious practices. Therefore, the religiosity of the elite is judged by their worldview and political ideology, while the general public's religiosity is judged by their observance of rituals and religious practices. Thus, the general public's lack of adherence to religious rituals reflects a deficiency in their religiosity, just as the elite's lack of deep religious thought and commitment to just behaviors reflects incomplete religiosity.

In regions with higher cultural levels, such as southeastern China, Muslim communities had significant activity in writing, translation, and authorship. In contrast, northern and western regions relied on traditional education, including oral instruction and mosque schools. In western China, encompassing Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai, the level of culture and education was relatively low, and Islamic jurisprudence was rarely discussed or pondered except among a small group of specialized religious scholars. The general Muslim population embodied their Islam through some formal rituals they considered the foundation of their religiosity. Due to their weak religious knowledge, they lacked the ability for rational analysis of their religious sciences, yet their innate religious instinct was strong, fueling a deep religious enthusiasm and a stronger commitment to their beliefs than others.

With the spread of religious and cultural ignorance in these regions, religious scholars began to focus on educating and raising religious awareness among the general public. They first used the Arabic language and its teaching to disseminate basic religious teachings and sought through their religious practices to inspire and mobilize millions of Muslims from the lower classes, making Islam an essential part of the collective consciousness of Muslims and even part of their ethnic identity. Since Sufism focuses more on the emotional and spiritual aspect than the rational, it strongly influenced and suited the cultural level of the inhabitants of these regions.

A large number of Sufi leaders emerged, thanks to their ability to emotionally influence the general public and their strong commitment to religious behavioral practices, bringing them closer to the general public, who focused on the outward manifestations of religious behavior to measure religiosity. Sufi leaders influenced the general public through their daily lives and behaviors, in addition to the special spiritual status granted to them by Sufi thought, making them religious symbols for the general Muslim population to emulate.

Thus, it can be said that the spiritual influence of each "Menhuan"—Sufi order—was directly linked to local cultural factors, rather than rational jurisprudential differences. The fate of any Sufi order, whether it flourished and

spread or declined and vanished, did not depend on strict religious teachings as much as it did on the personality of the order's leader and his ability to emotionally influence his followers through the spirituality and religious behaviors he displayed. Therefore, followers of Sufi orders did not merely follow religious teachings but, in fact, followed the leader's personality itself, as a living model of religiosity and spiritual practices. This phenomenon of "personality-centric" religiosity is a recurring theme in the work of Ma Tong (1983), who documented the pivotal role of charismatic founders in the history of Chinese Menhuan (Ma, 1983: 47).

The Need of the Chinese Muslim Community for the Menhuan System

The emergence of the Menhuan system—Sufi orders—was an inevitable outcome of the process of integrating and organizing the Chinese Muslim community. After the development of the Muslim community in regions like Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai over several centuries, starting from the 14th century until its stabilization and the emergence of its structure in the 17th century, the Muslim community began to experience cultural, economic, and demographic stability. Several factors contributed to this transformation, including the migration of a large number of Muslims from Central Asia during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), which increased the total number of Muslims in western China. Additionally, some small ethnic groups, such as the Salar and Dongxiang, converted to Islam in large numbers, or small tribes embraced Islam, further strengthening the spread of Islamic culture in these regions more than others.

With this transformation, Muslims in these regions began to transition from relying on external migration to internal population growth, reinforcing a collective cultural and religious identity. This demographic stability led to significant economic and cultural growth in these regions, resulting in a new situation where Muslims became the majority population in western China compared to the Han Chinese, who formed the core of inland China, by the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), i.e., in the early 19th century.

However, the number of Muslims during the Qing dynasty experienced dramatic fluctuations, especially in Gansu. According to population records from the Qing dynasty, particularly in 1861, the Muslim community lost 74.4% of its total population due to the Muslim rebellion against the Qing government and the subsequent suppression, including killings and displacements, reducing the population from 19,495,000 to 4,955,000. Overall, the population growth in this region reflected the economic and cultural growth experienced by Muslims during the early Qing dynasty, with the Muslim population in Gansu alone estimated at over 1.5 million.

The relationship between population, economy, and culture plays a decisive role in shaping any society and is the primary factor in the development of its relations with other minority ethnicities. As a result of these changes, the internal

structure of the Muslim community also began to evolve, creating the appropriate social conditions for the emergence of Sufi orders.

The cohesive Menhuan system first appeared during the Qing dynasty in regions like Lintao, Hezhou, Xunhua, Xining, and Huangzhong, eventually encompassing all areas of Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai. Since religious and political theories remain limited in impact unless linked to social reality, the Menhuan system was not merely a theoretical religious trend but interacted with social and political realities, leading to the emergence of mass movements that became influential forces in society and the political system. It strengthened the unity and cohesion of Muslims within a single community. The Menhuan system contributed to dismantling the traditional structure of the Chinese Muslim community, which was based on small, independent, and separate blocs. It integrated Muslims from different ethnicities under a semi-uniform Sufi ideology. Previously, Muslim communities lived separately according to their ethnic affiliations, such as the Hui, Salar, Dongxiang, and others, with limited communication between these ethnicities, even within the same ethnic group, where social ties were somewhat restricted. However, with the formation and spread of the Menhuan Sufi system, which was based on Sufi thought and used Islam as a unifying link among its followers, it restructured the Muslim community by transcending the traditional Islamic system of separate ethnicities. Compared to the old system, which was characterized by the absolute independence of each religious group, the Menhuan system in western China had a more competitive structure, a higher degree of internal discipline, and a greater ability to protect the Muslim community.

By absorbing previously independent religious spectrums into a unified framework, the Menhuan system was able to transcend geographical and ethnic boundaries, unifying not only Muslims of the same ethnicity but also integrating Muslims from different ethnicities into a shared religious structure. Thus, the ethnic differences among the main Muslim ethnicities in western China—the Hui, Salar, Bao'an, and Dongxiang—almost disappeared within the Menhuan Sufi system. Differentiation among them was based on their religious affiliations and the Sufi orders they followed. In this way, the Menhuan system strengthened the internal bonds among Muslims in western China and contributed to achieving a more integrated and stable organization of the Muslim community in these regions.

The Emergence of the Menhuan Sufi System and Its Impact on Unifying Muslims in Western China**

As Islam developed, the number of Muslims increased, and their internal composition diversified, with ethnic groups belonging to different cultural systems integrating into the Islamic community. This integration contributed to the growth of the Muslim community and the expansion of Islam's influence. However, several problems emerged, the most important being that individuals who embraced Islam

from different cultural backgrounds brought with them their original cultures, which could conflict with Islamic values. Thus, the greatest challenge for Muslim elites was how to integrate these diverse cultures to preserve the purity of Islam and promote its expansion. The emergence of the mosque education system partially addressed the shortage of Muslim scholars but had little impact on the religious beliefs of the general Muslim population. The emergence of the Menhuan system, however, represented a significant step towards unifying the religious beliefs of Muslims in Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai. The establishment of the Menhuan system as an economic foundation for the integration of the Muslim community, due to its wide geographical spread, large number of followers, high degree of concentration, and strong cohesion, led to a relatively large religious economic income. The high concentration of wealth is a distinctive feature of the Menhuan system in northwestern China, resembling the accumulation of wealth in a single focal point in feudal society. Within this system, Muslims possessed sufficient resources, making the religious economy a strong support for the system.

Under the traditional "educational" system, Islamic educational institutions were economically independent, leading to a lack of necessary economic interactions and linkages among them. However, economic integration forms the basis for any comprehensive social integration. The Menhuan system filled this gap by unifying disparate Muslim communities through the use of Islam as a unifying link, relying on mosques and shrines as focal points, and "order houses" as internal organizational nuclei. Religious donations and other forms of financial support played a role in accumulating material wealth, providing the material foundation for organizing the Muslim community.

Menhuan's Orders in Western China and Their Various Methods

There are more than forty Sufi orders in China since the emergence of the Sufi order system, and this research focuses on the four most important and famous orders, from which many smaller Sufi orders have branched out, spreading across villages and towns in western China. The Qadiriyya order is one of the oldest Sufi orders in the world and the first to spread in western China. It was founded by Sheikh Abdul Qadir al-Jilani (1078–1166 CE) and entered China through Hajj Abdullah al-Idrisi in 1662. It spread in western China (Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia) through a network of educational zawiyas (small mosques), focusing on ascetic practices and seclusion, and somewhat blended with local Buddhist culture. It followed the Hanafi school and emphasized ascetic practices, with the selection of the order's sheikh based on merit rather than inheritance. The sheikh's authority was decentralized, with limited terms of leadership, leading to the emergence of numerous other orders and interactions with the local Chinese context, integrating folk medicine with Sufi practices and facing historical challenges with other orders in interpreting religious texts.

The Naqshbandiyya order, known in China as the "Hidden Order," originated in Central Asia with Baha Al-Din Naqshband (1318–1389 CE) and entered China in the mid-18th century through two routes: Central Asia and Chinese pilgrims. It developed in India before entering China under Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624 CE), who integrated it with Sunni Sufism. In Xinjiang, it was spread by the Chinese Sheikh Ma Laichi (1681–1766 CE), who added his ideas to give it local Chinese characteristics. It also followed the Hanafi school and revived the Sunnah as its foundation. It was called the "Hidden Order" in China due to its practice of silent dhikr (remembrance of God), performed in the heart without vocalization. Leadership inheritance began in the fourth generation, transitioning from merit-based selection to hereditary succession, with authority transferred hierarchically. The order integrated into local culture through the use of dance as part of its devotional practices. However, its greatest challenge was political clashes with Qing generals who adhered to fundamentalist Islam, which opposed the existence of Sufi orders.

The Jahriyya order was founded by Sheikh Ma Mingxin (1719–1781 CE) after his journey to Yemen and Mecca. It was characterized by vocal dhikr, in contrast to the silent dhikr of the Naqshbandiyya. It is said that the Jahriyya evolved locally in China from the Ishaqiyya order, which spread in Xinjiang in the late 16th century and was adopted by Sheikh Ishaq, the fifth-generation follower of the Naqshbandiyya. However, there is no clear historical evidence for this, and some scholars believe that Sheikh Ma Mingxin was influenced by the Himawati Hui order in Xinjiang and added his teachings from Yemen and Mecca. Initially, the Jahriyya selected its sheikh based on merit, but it later transitioned to hereditary succession, following a hierarchical system with a high degree of veneration for the sheikhs. The order faced persecution from the Qing government, leading to constant political clashes. It initially adopted the concept of "martyrdom" as part of its religious identity, which was realized with the martyrdom of its founder, Sheikh Ma Mingxin, followed by the third sheikh, Ma Tatian, who was killed by imperial soldiers in Heilongjiang, and reached its peak with the martyrdom of the fifth sheikh, Ma Hualong. Followers believed that trials were sent by God to test them, and success in these trials required facing life's difficulties with martyrdom, distinguishing them from non-believers who feared death. However, after the leadership passed to Sheikh Ma Yuanchang (1853–1920 CE), he began to propagate new ideas for the Jahriyya, emphasizing that Islam is a religion for the living, not the dead. He argued that if everyone died as martyrs, who would spread the religion and uphold the word of Islam? Martyrdom, he said, must have logical reasons, and a believer should not seek death without cause, as that would be a sin. After this religious discourse was renewed by Sheikh Ma Yuanchang, the Jahriyya regained prominence, and its followers continue to spread, primarily in Gansu province in western China.

Among the Sufi orders that spread later in China, despite their origins in the 13th century in Central Asia (particularly in present-day Uzbekistan), is the Kubrawiyya order, founded by Sheikh Najmuddin Kubra (1145–1221 CE) in Central Asia. Chinese historians claim he visited China three times to various locations. The Kubrawiyya spread mainly among the Dongxiang Muslim ethnic group in the 18th century and was characterized by strict spiritual practices, emphasizing hereditary leadership and adherence to the Hanafi school. It required the complete performance of basic religious duties as a condition for perfect faith. Its dhikr practice involved four levels: the tongue, the heart, the mind, and the soul, with a prerequisite of fasting without interruption for at least three months. Authority was absolutely centralized in the sheikh, known as the "guide." Despite some differences among these orders, they shared three common aspects:

1. The sanctity of the sheikh: In all orders, the sheikh's status was elevated to that of a spiritual mediator between the follower and God, acting as an intermediary between the followers and the divine. Followers bestowed awe-inspiring titles upon their sheikhs.
2. Social organization: The Qadiriyya and Kubrawiyya reflected the tribal structure of western China, while the Jahriyya and Naqshbandiyya represented urban Sufism.
3. Local interpretation: Sufi orders became part of the cultural and social fabric of western China, with Sufi terms and the names of the orders themselves reinterpreted according to local understandings. For example, followers of the Naqshbandiyya (known as the "Hidden Order" in China) believed its name derived from a practice combining the Arabic word "naqsh" (engraving) and the Persian word "band" (binding), symbolizing the engraving of God's name on the follower's heart and the bond between the Creator and the creation. Similarly, followers of the Jahriyya believed that the word "Jahriyya," composed of five letters, held hidden spiritual meanings revealed through meditative and practical spiritual practices. The primary distinction among the four orders, as well as the smaller orders that branched from them, lay in their mechanisms for understanding and applying Islamic law, all of which were tied to the personality of the sheikh. The Qadiriyya's legitimacy was scholarly, selecting the most knowledgeable as sheikh. The Naqshbandiyya's legitimacy was historical, granting leadership to descendants of the order's founder. The Jahriyya's legitimacy was based on the sheikh's personal strength and ideological direction, evident in the shift from glorifying martyrdom to secularizing the discourse. The Kubrawiyya's legitimacy was existential, rooted in the philosophy of union with God.

The legacy of the Menhuan system continues to influence Muslim communities in western China. While the system's formal structure has declined, its emphasis on spiritual guidance, community organization, and cultural integration

remains relevant. Today, Sufi orders in China face new challenges, such as Social restrictions on religious practices and the influence of global Islamic movements. However, the Menhuan system's ability to adapt to local conditions offers valuable lessons for the preservation of Islamic identity in a rapidly changing world.

Concluding Reflections and a Path Forward

This exploration of the Menhuan system reveals an institution that transcended mere religious organization, emerging instead as a vibrant social organism deeply intertwined with the landscape and history of western China. We have traced how it artfully wove Sufi mysticism into the fabric of local Chinese culture, creating a resilient social tapestry that united Muslim communities across Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai. This framework served as both anchor and compass, guiding believers through the complex currents of imperial policies and internal transformation. Yet, the very hierarchical structure that provided stability also cultivated tension, reminding us how closely community and conflict can coexist. The enduring narrative of the Menhuan ultimately testifies to the remarkable adaptability of spiritual traditions, demonstrating how a distinct Islamic identity took root and flourished within China's rich cultural soil.

As this chapter closes, new questions naturally emerge, inviting further exploration into areas that remain illuminated yet require deeper understanding. Future scholarship might consider how contemporary forces—global connections, evolving policies, and digital transformation—are reshaping leadership and community bonds within today's Menhuan. There is also much to learn from examining the nuanced relationships between different orders, where variations in ritual and teaching reveal both shared foundations and distinctive paths. Particularly important would be research that brings to light the often-overlooked contributions of women, whose roles in sustaining religious life, education, and community welfare would complete our understanding of these communities. Looking beyond China's borders, comparative studies with Sufi traditions in Southeast Asia and Central Asia could reveal fascinating patterns in how mystical Islam adapts and thrives across different cultural contexts.

This work stands on the shoulders of countless individuals who preserve and share knowledge. To the librarians and archivists worldwide who safeguard our collective memory, and to the mentors and colleagues whose guidance illuminated this path, I offer my deepest gratitude. Whatever insights this work contains owe much to their generosity; its limitations remain my own.

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