

# From the Dual Perspectives of Islam and the Qing Dynasty: Menhuan Conflicts in Northwest China (17th-18th Centuries)

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**Abstract:** *This paper adopts the dual perspectives of the Islamic world and the Qing Dynasty to re-examine the menhuan conflicts in northwest China from the 17th to the 18th centuries. The study clearly concludes that menhuan conflicts were jointly triggered by multiple factors within Islam and northwest Chinese society during the Qing Dynasty, with the unique social environment of northwest China in particular playing a more crucial role. The core of menhuan conflicts lies in the struggle between different sects for spheres of influence and interests. Further analysis reveals that the terms "New Teaching" and "Old Teaching" are in fact merely simplified distinctions made by Muslims between different sects based on chronological order, with no deeper meanings.*

**Keywords:** Qing Dynasty; Muslims; Menhuan; Islam.

## 1. MENHUAN CONFLICTS IN NORTHWEST CHINA DURING THE QING DYNASTY: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIV

As for the time when Islam was introduced to China, there have always been different views in academic circles [1][2]. The prevailing view is that Muslims first came to China during the Zhenguan period of the Tang Dynasty, yet Islam as a religious system was introduced to China after the 7th century. After Muhammad unified the Arabian Peninsula, numerous Arab merchants and Persians who believed in Islam entered China. They intermarried with Han Chinese, gradually increasing the number of Muslim believers in China and thus forming a Hui Muslim community that followed Islam.

After Muhammad's death, the issue of succession quickly became a focal point of concern in the Islamic world. Intense divisions emerged within Islam over this issue, mainly forming four major sects. Coupled with differences in doctrinal interpretations within the Islamic world and the interweaving of political struggles, these factors collectively led to persistent sectarian conflicts. The essence of the succession struggle within Islam is actually a conflict between the hereditary bloodline system and the electoral system. During the Qianlong period, the conflict between the Huasi menhuan in Northwest China and Ma Mingxin's Zhehelinye (Jahriyya) was partly centered on whether the religious authority of the menhuan should be "passed to the worthy" or "hereditarily inherited," although this was only one part of the many differences between the two sides.

Therefore, when studying the history of Islam in China, we must not only ground it in the context of Chinese society but also examine it within the broad perspective of the global history of Islam, avoiding isolated research. This point was already emphasized by the American scholar Joseph Fletcher in the last century when studying the Naqshbandiyya Sufi order and the relationship between Ma Laichi and Ma Mingxin. He argued: "The history of Islam in China can hardly be understood apart from the overall history of Islam. The history of the Sufi Naqshbandiyya order, which advocated adherence to Shari'a, in China is the best example. Indeed, in 18th and 19th century China, the history of the Naqshbandiyya was the history of Islam in China. The obscure role of the Naqshbandiyya in Chinese history indicates that research on the northeastern region of the Muslim world remains underdeveloped." [3] In this regard, Jonathan N. Lipman has conducted more in-depth research. He argues that while there were indeed close ties between Northwest Chinese Muslims and the broader Islamic world, the particularities of the Northwest region must also be taken into account when examining the menhuan struggles during the Qianlong period. For instance, disputes between the Huasi sect, the Zhehelinye (Jahriyya) sect, and the Gedimu sect over loud versus soft recitation in praise of the Prophet, as well as differences in the timing of breaking fast, did not trigger such intense conflicts in the Arab world as they did in Northwest China. In fact, multiple practices coexisted in the Arab world, indicating that the rituals themselves were not the primary cause of conflict [4]. Power struggles over the caliphate in the Islamic world, doctrinal disputes, and the continuous global expansion of Islam—during which it constantly absorbed elements from other civilizations—collectively acted

within Islam, continuously giving rise to New Teachings. Jin Yijiu argues: "Followers of the Shi 'a not only had long parted ways with the mainstream Muslim community, but also, by the 10th century, their doctrinal principles, derived from their political claims, had developed relatively independently. As a result, the rift in doctrinal propositions became irreparable. From this point onward, the religious system of Islam took shape and became fixed. In terms of ideology and organizational structure, a unified Islam no longer existed." [5] Almost every newly emerging sect can find corresponding scriptures in classical doctrines to serve as its basis. It was precisely against such a backdrop that Sufism came into being.

The rise of Sufism was closely linked to new changes in Islamic society. With the rise of the Umayyad Dynasty, the Islamic world entered a period of prosperity and strength; in particular, the accumulation of wealth led some believers to live a luxurious life. Against this backdrop, Sufism, characterized by asceticism, came into being. Sufis adhered to asceticism and austerity, pursuing inner purity to draw closer to God. Thus, they were called Sufis, meaning "wool"—their simple outer clothing intuitively reflected the pursuits of Sufis. These individuals persisted in asceticism, austerity, and the pursuit of inner purity to approach the Lord. It is thus easy to understand why they were called Sufis, i.e., "wool"—the simplicity of their outer clothing could intuitively embody the pursuits of Sufis. Meanwhile, Sufis emphasized in their rituals: "Be more devout and diligent, strictly abide by the Shari 'a and perform religious duties; even, in accordance with the verses of the Qur'an, engage in prolonged congregational prayers, night prayers, fasting, prostration, retreat, and dhikr, hoping to stay away from and free themselves from worldly disturbances through their own meditation, contemplation, spiritual practice, and remembrance." Sufism was introduced into China from the end of the Yuan Dynasty, and its influence gradually expanded during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, exerting a profound impact on Islam in China—especially a severe impact on the mosque-centered jiaofang system (religious community system). Ding Mingjun argues: "Under the influence of Sufism, four major menhuans (Sufi orders) and religious orders were successively formed within the various Muslim ethnic groups in Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai [6]."

Previously, the mosque-centered jiaofang (religious communities) had little contact with each other and were relatively independent. However, under the menhuan system, the organization was relatively strict, with shaykhs (religious leaders) and followers; each menhuan controlled several mosques, wielded considerable influence, and the shaykhs held great authority among their followers. During field investigations, the author also noticed that even in the 21st century, followers still maintain profound respect for the shaykhs of their own menhuan. They refer to the founders of the menhuan as "Daozu" (founders of the spiritual path) or by their "daohao" (religious titles), address the deceased as "xianren" (ancestors), and call the current shaykh "dangjia ren" (the head of the order), rarely using their personal names. The menhuan system in China inherited this characteristic. Take the Khufiyya and Qadiriyya as examples: ordinary Muslims usually perform "Banda" (Fajr, the morning prayer) before sunrise. However, followers of menhuan such as the Khufiyya get up at three or four in the early morning to engage in retreat, scripture recitation, and prayer, before performing the morning prayer. The author has interviewed some religious leaders and devout followers of Linxia menhuan, who still adhere to these traditions. For instance, even in winter, some religious leaders do not use heating in their rooms; instead, they kneel in quiet meditation in the cold rooms and even clean their bodies with cold water, considering these practices an indispensable part of menhuan spiritual cultivation.

In the Islamic world, the asceticism of Sufism differed greatly from that of earlier Muslims, so it was criticized and denounced as "heterodoxy" from its inception. This explains why Sufism was bound to trigger sectarian conflicts after entering China, because what had been introduced to China earlier was the "Zungu Pai" (the "Adherents to Tradition") in Islam, namely the "Gedimu," also known as the "Old Teaching."

Religious conflicts in Northwest China can also be observed from the perspective of the Islamic world. After Muhammad, the Islamic world experienced division, with different sects emerging one after another. As a branch of the Muslim world, Chinese Islam has always maintained exchanges with the Middle East. Therefore, newly emerging sects in the Muslim world were also introduced into China through missionaries coming to China or pilgrims returning from the Hajj. The disseminators who introduced emerging Islamic sects from the Islamic world to China mainly fall into two categories: first, missionary groups from the Middle East, such as Dong Laxi, a disseminator of the Qadiriyya sect. This phenomenon was facilitated by the abolition of the maritime prohibition policy during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, which allowed these religious orders to continuously come to China for missionary activities via land and sea routes, with Muslim believers regarding the spread of their faith as a mission. Second, Chinese believers who went to the Middle East for the Hajj, such as Ma Laichi of the Huasi menhuan and Ma Mingxin of the Zhehelinye (Jahriyya). In addition, there is another scenario: splits within menhuan due to disputes over succession or conflicts of interest. However, such splits are confined to the sect itself

and do not lead to the establishment of New Teachings (this phenomenon is quite common in the Hezhou region of Gansu, as seen from the Huasi menhuan of the Khufiyya to the Dagongbei of the Qadiriyya. For example, under the Huasi menhuan, there are the Huasi Gongbei and the Laohuasi Mosque; currently, the Huasi Gongbei has obviously lost control over its affiliated mosque. This can also be reflected in the architectural styles of the Huasi Gongbei and the Laohuasi Mosque, especially the newly renovated Huasi Mosque in recent years, whose style no longer retains the traditional menhuan features). The root cause of internal splits within menhuan lies in their inherent flaws: under the influence of Sufism, menhuan were supposed to pursue a life of asceticism, simplicity, and low material desires. However, with the continuous progress of society—especially the increase in material wealth and the growth in the number of believers—the property and economic income of menhuan also expanded. This led to the gradual indulgence in luxury within menhuan, deviating from their original intent and essence. At the same time, struggles over religious authority and control of property continuously erupted within menhuan, further triggering splits. In other words, the greatest threat to menhuan comes precisely from themselves.

After the introduction of New Teachings, conflicts with existing sects are inevitable. Due to the lack of understanding of the beliefs of these marginal groups among rulers in Han-inhabited areas, they often adopted inappropriate handling methods, coupled with unbalanced strategies, which in turn triggered social unrest in border regions. Jonathan N. Lipman argues: "The Qing government had little knowledge of detailed information about Muslims and usually only paid attention when violent incidents occurred among Muslim groups. Much of the information about Muslims was often limited to exotic descriptions." [7] From conflicts between the Gedimu and Sufi menhuan, to contradictions among the four major menhuan, and further to struggles between the Old Teaching and the Ikhwan, all demonstrate that the turmoil in Northwest China stemmed from the combined effects of doctrinal and interest-based conflicts among local sects, as well as the inherent divisions within the Islamic world. Sects introduced into China earlier took root over time and became the "Old Teaching," while the Islamic world continuously spawned new factions, which then entered China as the "New Teaching." Later, newer "new Teaching" emerged, and the previous ones thus became the "Old Teaching." Take the Huasi menhuan founded by Ma Laichi as an example: during the Yongzheng period, after Ma Laichi returned to China and began preaching in the Northwest, the sect he propagated was initially regarded as the "New Teaching." By the Qianlong period, however, the Huasi menhuan, having spread for many years, gradually came to be called the "Old Teaching." Subsequently, when Ma Mingxin returned to China to preach, conflicts arose between his Jahriyya (Zhehelinye) and the Huasi menhuan, with Ma Mingxin's Jahriyya being seen as the "New Teaching." In modern times, when Ma Guoyuan propagated the "Ikhwan," Ma Mingxin's Jahriyya had already turned into the "Old Teaching," while the "Ikhwan" became the new teaching. It is evident that throughout the Qing Dynasty, there was no fixed or rigorous definition of the so-called "New Teaching" or "Old Teaching"; there was not even a "New Teaching" faction with distinct doctrines and characteristics of a "new Teaching." This was merely a simplistic distinction made by outsiders or believers based on the order of emergence and differences in doctrines. In other words, the New and Old Teachings were a set of dynamically evolving concepts. Since there was no strictly defined "New Teaching," one can understand how ill-suited the Qing government's policy of "supporting the Old Teaching and suppressing the New Teaching" was to reality, and how the government's policy failures gradually intensified sectarian conflicts, thereby undermining social stability in the Northwest. If during the Qianlong period, menhuan struggles were still in their infancy, and the Qing Dynasty's shallow understanding of menhuan led to mishandling of these conflicts, then by the Tongzhi period of the late Qing, the Qing government remained muddled in its understanding of the "New Teaching" and "Old Teaching" in the Northwest. It mistakenly attributed the turmoil in the Northwest to the "New Teaching"—a sect deemed troublemaking—and harbored the fantasy of resolving the problem once and for all by permanently banning the "New Teaching." In reality, however, the sect that the Qing government strictly prohibited did not exist, for the "New Teaching" was an evolving concept and never a fixed sectarian entity. The Qing government lacked a comprehensive understanding of Northwest Muslims, so when problems arose, it hastily resorted to inland experiences for handling, often triggering greater loss of control. During the Tongzhi period, sects represented by the Jahriyya stirred up trouble again. Later, Zuo Zongtang took charge in Shaanxi and Gansu, and in a bid to restore order, he submitted a memorial to the court, striving to completely ban the "New Teaching."

In his memorial to the throne, he stated:

Now, fortunately, through executions and exiles (of rebels), such troubles can be expected to be permanently eliminated. However, the New Teaching has already spread widely; in places where Hui people gather, most have people propagating and following the New Teaching. If we do not promptly and strictly prohibit and eradicate it, I still worry that over time, those forces will resurge. Ill-intentioned individuals, always thinking of secretly launching rebellions, will once again trouble the military. Except for the already captured rebels such as Halifei,

Ahong, Mu Si, Mu Wu, Ma Chengqi, Niu Zhanyuan, and Niu Zhankuan—who have been interrogated and punished—and the two at-large criminals, Master Jin and Ma Zhuangxian, official documents have been issued to inform all provinces to uniformly arrest and punish them. At the same time, announcements are being issued to inform the Hui people in all subordinate prefectures, subprefectures, departments, and counties under our jurisdiction, strictly prohibiting the propagation and practice of the New Teaching. Those who were previously mistakenly misled by the New Teaching are all allowed to voluntarily surrender, renounce the New Teaching, and be exempt from punishment. It is hoped that they will gradually embark on the path of enlightenment, forever escape delusion, and that once the New Teaching is eradicated, the Hui people will find peace, ensuring the Shaanxi-Gansu region remains free from trouble for a hundred years. As for the propagation and practice of the New Teaching in various provinces, the duration is still short. Virtuous Hui people all report that although the New Teaching has spread widely, most Hui people in each province also know it is a heretical doctrine within Islam, and many are unwilling to readily believe in it. For example, there are about 2,000 Hui people in Heilongjiang, but only over 100 propagate and follow the New Teaching—this is clear evidence. If we seize this moment to issue strict orders to prohibit it, we can prevent the seeds of rebellion. May I respectfully implore Your Majesty to order all generals, governors, and senior officials to strictly prohibit the Hui New Teaching; issue announcements at all mosques within their jurisdictions, stipulating that if New Teaching Ahongs, Halifei, or others enter their territories to incite and mislead ignorant Hui people, the leaders and managers of each mosque shall bind them and send them to local authorities for interrogation and punishment. Those who were previously lured into the New Teaching are still allowed to voluntarily surrender, renounce it, and be exempt from punishment. Then, ignorant Hui people will have fear, and virtuous Hui people will have admiration. Not only will the regions achieve peace, but the Hui people will also long enjoy Your Majesty's grace. Your servant, every time I interpret the court's decree—"Distinguish between the virtuous and bandits, not between Han and Hui"—admires Your Majesty's wisdom and righteous virtue, which aligns with the principles of Emperor Gaozong (Qianlong) and highlights that Your Majesty understands the essentials of military affairs. These are my humble personal views, presented in this memorial based on actual circumstances. I respectfully request the Empress Dowager and Your Majesty to review it and instruct on its implementation [8].

The "New Teaching" that Zuo Zongtang sought to completely ban actually referred to the "Jahriyya" (Zhehelinye) introduced by Ma Mingxin during the Qianlong period. However, the turmoil in the Northwest during the Tongzhi period was not caused solely by the so-called "New Teaching," i.e., the Jahriyya faction. In fact, multiple factions including the Jahriyya, the Huasi, as well as various ethnic groups such as the Salar and Dongxiang peoples, were all involved in this turmoil. Although Zuo Zongtang executed Ma Hualong, the leader of the Jahriyya, and took measures to strictly prohibit the "New Teaching," these actions failed to fundamentally resolve the issue. Instead, they led to an imbalance of power among sects in the Northwest, creating a situation where one faction dominated, and even allowed other factions to use the dynasty's military power to eliminate dissidents. Historical facts show that under the strategy of strictly prohibiting the New Teaching and "ruling the Hui by the Hui," some forces led by Ma Zhanao (of the Huasi faction) chose to submit to the Qing Dynasty to eliminate their rivals, and gradually developed into warlord forces that influenced the stability of the Northwest region with the support of the Qing Dynasty. Thus, in the long run, from the Qianlong to the Tongzhi reigns, and onward to the Guangxu period and beyond, the turmoil in the entire Northwest was not caused solely by the Jahriyya, the "New Teaching" as termed by the Qing Dynasty. Rather, it was the combination of internal conflicts and bloodshed among various factions, coupled with improper handling by the Qing Dynasty, that led to the major incidents of the 18th-century Qianlong period and another round of unrest in the Northwest during the 19th century when the Qing Dynasty was beset by internal troubles and external invasions. All of this initially stemmed from sectarian struggles among marginal groups in the Northwest. Although Zuo Zongtang strictly prohibited the New Teaching, it was later the "Ikhwan" introduced by Ma Guoyuan that truly became the "New Teaching" in the Hexi region. Over time, newer sects emerged beyond the Ikhwan. Therefore, the so-called policy of "supporting the Old Teachings and suppressing the new ones" only led to more problems.

In this regard, the handling methods of the Qianlong court were more appropriate. On the sixth day of the fifth lunar month in the tenth year of the Tongzhi reign, in response to Zuo Zongtang's Memorial Requesting the Total Prohibition of the Hui New Teaching, the Qing court cited an imperial edict from the Qianlong period and replied:

Imperial Edict: "Previously, based on Zuo Zongtang's memorial requesting the prohibition of the Hui New Teaching. The memorial states that during the Qianlong period, Hui rebels such as Ma Mingxin founded the New Teaching, deluding people and creating disturbances. They were subsequently executed, but their roots were not completely eradicated. Later, Ma Er, father of Ma Hualong, and others secretly propagated the New Teaching, thus leading to the outbreak of rebellion. This is all because the New Teaching's practices are strange and eccentric,



deluding ignorant Hui people and making them indulge in it without awakening. Now, although Ma Hualong has been executed in accordance with the law, the New Teaching has spread increasingly widely and must be strictly prohibited to prevent the seeds of rebellion. Zuo Zongtang's submission of these views is naturally for the sake of considering hidden dangers and taking precautions in advance. However, the Hui people live scattered across various provinces, all being people registered in the household system, each living peacefully and making a living. If strict prohibitions are established for the sake of distinguishing between the Old Teaching and the New Teaching, local officials, if even slightly negligent, will allow petty officials to take this as a pretext to search and extort. Harassment will inevitably occur, and the Hui people will fall into panic and doubt, instead giving rise to other troubles. Previously, after Hui rebels such as Tian Wu created disturbances in the 49th year of the Qianlong reign, (the court) acted in accordance with the edict of Emperor Qianlong: 'In handling this matter, one should only distinguish between those who participated in the rebellion and those who did not. As for the difference between good and evil, there is no need to discuss whether they belong to the New Teaching or the Old Teaching.' Respectfully issued." [9]

The Qing court believed that since Ma Hualong had already been executed, it would have been proper to strictly prohibit the "New Teaching" at this point. However, considering practical factors—such as the scattered distribution of Hui people, with followers of the "Jahriyya faction" in particular spread across Gansu, Yunnan, Ningxia, Jilin, and other regions—if a blanket prohibition were enforced, local officials might expand the scope of suppression during manhunts, potentially triggering nationwide unrest. Therefore, in handling the matter, the court should follow the old precedent of the Qianlong period: all members of the Jahriyya faction who had joined the rebel uprising were to be arrested, while those who abided by the law and had not participated would no longer be held accountable. This would contain the incident to the core area of the Northwest where it had erupted, preventing it from spreading nationwide. If the New Teaching were comprehensively banned, local officials might expand the scope of suppression during manhunts, even provoking reactive actions from other followers who had not participated, thereby triggering nationwide unrest. Hence, in addressing this issue, the old precedent of the Qianlong period should be followed.

On this basis, for followers of the "New Teaching," persuasion and dissuasion should be adopted to make them renounce their belief in the New Teaching (Jahriyya/Zhehelinye):

Subsequently, in the 54th year of the Qianlong reign, Le Bao submitted a memorial stating that the New Teaching was a great harm to Islam, and he planned to have the leaders of Jingning and other places investigate and report on the situation. The emperor then issued another edict: ordering local officials to find ways to enlighten and guide (the followers) and not to make distinctions using the terms "New Teaching" and "Old Teaching." Now, we should once again reflect on the edict of Emperor Qianlong from that time. During this incident (the Tongzhi period), Ma Hualong launched a rebellion; he himself has been executed, and his followers have also been eliminated. This is precisely an opportunity to earnestly inform the Hui people, urging them to repent as soon as possible, so that they do not take the wrong path and commit crimes. Zuo Zongtang has now issued announcements in the prefectures and counties under his jurisdiction, prohibiting the practice of the New Teaching, and allowing those who once believed in the New Teaching to surrender, repent, and be exempt from punishment. However, it is still necessary to strictly order local officials to properly guide them, and not to act too hastily, lest incidents be triggered. As for Zuo Zongtang's request to order all provinces to uniformly ban the New Teaching, it may be handled with a delay [10].

Given that numerous social conflicts and popular uprisings occurred during the Qianlong reign[ There is a wealth of historical materials on this, see in particular *Selected Materials on the History of Peasant Wars in the Qing Dynasty*, Volume III, edited by the Department of History, Renmin University of China, and the First Historical Archives of China (Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 1991); and *Materials on the Resistance Struggles of Urban and Rural People During the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong Periods*, edited by the Institute of Qing History, Renmin University of China (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1979).], Emperor Qianlong was well aware that most of these incidents could be attributed to the early arbitrary exploitation by local officials and their incompetence in adjudicating and handling cases, which led to the widespread outbreak of popular uprisings. In dealing with such incidents, local officials often failed to conduct in-depth investigations into the ins and outs of events, usually adopting a simplistic one-size-fits-all approach and resorting to violent suppression. As a result, they not only failed to properly handle the "insurgents" but also forced innocent people to join the rebellion. For this reason, when dealing with the "New Teaching," Emperor Qianlong repeatedly emphasized that one should not simply distinguish between the New and Old Teachings.

Therefore, Zuo Zongtang's measure of simply banning the "New Teaching" (the Jahriyya faction) would not put an end to the turmoil in the Northwest. Several uprisings broke out in the Northwest after Zuo Zongtang, yet the instigators were not the "Jahriyya faction" he sought to strictly prohibit. This was because the "New Teaching" had transformed once again, and the Jahriyya faction had been classified as an "Old Teaching." For rulers, the most important thing in handling sectarian issues in the Northwest was neither to support one faction and suppress another, nor to strictly prevent and block the emergence of New Teachings. Instead, it was to gain a thorough understanding of the sects in the Northwest and promptly address their internal disputes.

## **2. ORIGINS OF THE CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE HUASI (KHUFIYYA) AND ZHEHELINYE (JAHRIYYA) MENHUAN**

Conflicts among menhuan did not begin with the rise of Ma Mingxin's Zhehelinye faction; in fact, frictions emerged between Ma Laichi and existing sects as early as when he returned to China to propagate his teachings during the Yongzheng period. Even before Ma Laichi's return, disputes had already existed in the Hezhou region over the order of timing for "breaking fast" and "salat" (ritual prayer). Though these were merely details in religious rituals and seemed insignificant, they became particularly crucial due to their connection with interest struggles and doctrinal differences among various factions.

In the 12th year of the Yongzheng reign (1734), Ma Laichi—who had studied Khufiyya teachings in the Middle East—returned to China. He subsequently founded the Huasi (Khufiyya) menhuan and launched missionary activities in northwest China. Ma Laichi advocated simplifying religious rituals; in particular, he proposed that ahongs (Islamic clerics) should recite the more concise Mingshale (a brief Islamic scripture) when conducting religious activities in the homes of believers. This not only shortened the duration of the rituals but also reduced the amount of property demanded from believers. As recorded in Gansu-Ningxia-Qinghai Historical Overview:

Mingshajing was presumably compiled through either tampering with or excerpting from the Tianjing (the Scripture of Heaven, i.e., the Qur'an). When Hui Muslim families encountered events of good or ill fortune such as weddings and funerals, they would certainly invite ahongs to recite scriptures; after the service, they would present silver or money as a token of gratitude, which was called "bushi" (alms). "Ahong" is a title for those in charge of religious affairs. The original scriptures (used in rituals) required assembling many people and entailed high costs; however, the Mingshajing, being a single volume, was both simple and cost-effective. Moreover, it felt novel to people, so for a time, everyone followed suit and began using it [11].

Ma Laichi argued: "Reciting scriptures is the duty of religious figures; excessive demand for property is in fact the reification of faith." He advocated alleviating the burden on believers, aiming also to maintain the simplicity of religious personnel. This aligns with the Sufi concept of ascetic simplicity, indicating that the early founders of the menhuan were still personally practicing the doctrines of Sufism. However, his propositions soon aroused dissatisfaction among followers of the traditional "Old Teaching." In the fifth lunar month of the 12th year of the Qianlong reign (1747), Ma Yinghuan, a Hui Muslim of the "Old Teaching" in Hezhou, reported Ma Laichi to the Qing court on the charge of spreading "heretical teachings."

Subsequently, Emperor Qianlong learned of this matter and issued an edict stating:

(The Emperor) instructed the Grand Councillors: Ma Yinghuan, a Hui Muslim from Hezhou, Shaanxi, has accused Ma Laichi, of the same religious community, of using a heterodox sect to delude the masses. He also mentioned that Ma Laichi founded the "Mingsha Hui" (Bright Sand Society) and engaged in the practice of blowing sand into people's ears. Ordinarily, cases where commoners petition the court directly, regardless of their truthfulness, are not accepted for trial according to regulations. However, Shaanxi Province has a large Hui population, who are tough in character and united—prone to stirring up trouble. For instance, among the soldiers of the Guyuan Garrison, seven or eight out of ten are Hui; last winter, they robbed shops and acted lawlessly, which is clear evidence. While the truth of Ma Yinghuan's accusation remains uncertain, he claims that "a heterodox sect has been established outside of Huijiao (Islam)." If this continues, the number of followers will grow, and the two sides will compete and contend, inevitably leading to endless feuds and killings. Such unrest will spread and harm local customs and people—its seeds must be nipped in the bud early. We must thoroughly root out these evil and fallacious practices to stabilize the region; we cannot rigidly adhere to the old rule of "not accepting the case for trial" and turn a blind eye to it. Order that Shuhede's original memorial be copied and sent to Governor-General Zhang Guang<sup>四</sup> and Governor Huang Tinggui, instructing them to handle the matter carefully based on the facts.

If this heterodox sect has truly gathered two to three thousand people, Governor Huang Tinggui should not have been entirely unaware of it. Order them to investigate and clarify the facts [12].

It can be seen from this historical material that the Qing decision-making bodies did not fully understand the causes and consequences of the conflict between Ma Yinghuan and Ma Laichi. For instance, the so-called claim that Ma Laichi "blowed sand into people's ears" was actually a homophone of Mingshale—a Khufiyya scripture that Ma Laichi had brought back from the Middle East. In addition to adhering to the core classics such as the Qur'an and the Hadith, the Huasi menhuan also relied on original scriptures like Mingshale, Maoluti, and 80 volumes of kitab (books), thus quickly gaining popularity among believers in northwest China. The Qing government, lacking such understanding, regarded this as some form of exotic sorcery.

Despite its inadequate knowledge of the religious beliefs of marginalized groups, Emperor Qianlong was well aware of the perfunctory attitude of local officials. He repeatedly emphasized in his imperial edict: "In recent times, prefectural and county officials, when handling lawsuits on their own, not only lack the ability for loyalty, trustworthiness, clear perception, and decisive judgment, but also hold a mentality of perfunctory delay and evasion of responsibility. They are utterly unable to distinguish right from wrong or discern the truth of cases; lawsuits are always left unaddressed and delayed, failing to reach a conclusion or verdict. In adjudicating cases, they merely go through the motions by issuing an official document or notice, and no longer care at all whether the common people obey or follow the rulings" [13]. In his imperial edict, Emperor Qianlong cited the "case of mass gathering in Wanquan, Shanxi" ① as an example, emphasizing that social unrest caused by local civil conflicts often stemmed from officials' lack of political vigilance in the early stages—failing to ascertain the facts in a timely manner, address the people's concerns, and thus ultimately triggering social conflicts. Therefore, in the case of Ma Yinghuan and Ma Laichi, Emperor Qianlong warned local officials with this, stating: "The recent case of people gathering to cause trouble in Wanquan County, Shanxi, also escalated into a major incident because prefectural and county officials failed to handle it early. Officials serve in local areas, yet their orders go unheeded, their prohibitions are ignored, lawsuits cannot be properly adjudicated, and evildoers cannot be punished—what use are these puppet-like officials then? Convey orders to those governors-general and governors: sternly admonish all prefectural and county officials that when handling lawsuits, they must adjudicate impartially. What should be prohibited must be strictly banned, and the root causes thoroughly eradicated. Do not tolerate evildoers, seeking the false reputation of "benevolence" only to leave hidden dangers for the common people." [14]

Emperor Qianlong acutely perceived that the matter was not as simple as described in the memorials, so he ordered local authorities to conduct a further investigation and report back. Subsequently, after conducting an investigation, Governor-General Zhang Guangshu 张广书 reported back:

There are many Hui Muslims in Gansu Province, with a particularly large concentration in Hezhou. Generally speaking, their practices of reciting scriptures and performing salat (ritual prayers) are consistent across the religious community. The only slight differences lie in the timing of breaking fast (some earlier, some later) and the complexity of scripture recitations (some elaborate, some simplified). Ma Laichi, in previous years, traveled to other provinces for trade and brought back an excerpted scripture, named Mingshale. This refers, in Chinese, to "an excerpt of this scripture"—it is not about blowing sand into people's ears. As for Ma Yinghuan's accusation that Ma Laichi was spreading heterodox teachings, after reviewing the case files, there is no basis for this at all. The only relevant incident was the death of a Hui Muslim named Ma Bushi; his relative Ma Yinghu, while attending the funeral, distributed youxiang (a type of fried bread) ②, and a conflict and fight broke out over competing for the food. Ma Yinghuan filed a complaint with the prefecture, but after investigation, the local authorities found errors in the claim and thus dismissed the case. This incident stemmed from a fight, not any issue related to heterodox teachings, and Ma Laichi's name did not appear in the case records at all. Additionally, according to a report by Jin Gui, an official of the Garrison of Hezhou: "Local Hui Muslims generally recite scriptures and perform salat at a nearby mosque; there is no such designation as 'Mingsha Hui'. As for the Hui community, although they all adhere to the same religion, each has their own occupation. The salat rituals only take a few days, and after the rituals, people disperse—there has never been a gathering of two to three thousand people. It has been verified that this garrison official (Jin Gui) is also of Hui ethnicity." What he said is presumably correct, but since Ma Yinghuan has not come to Gansu for a face-to-face confrontation, it is possible that (Jin Gui) might be showing partiality to one side. If there is evidence that Ma Laichi has deluded the masses, he should naturally be thoroughly investigated and dealt with; if Ma Yinghuan has made a false accusation, he must, in particular, be prosecuted in accordance with the law. Order that Ma Yinghuan be escorted to Gansu Province for a face-to-face confrontation; at the same time, send a dispatch to Governor Huang Tinggui, instructing Gansu officials to bring all the involved suspects into custody. Once Ma Yinghuan arrives, conduct a thorough trial and handling of the case. The Emperor

issued an edict: Order that matters be handled as requested. Relevant authorities are to be informed [15].

After a thorough investigation by Governor-General Zhang Guangs 張廣森, the matter gradually became clear. First, the "Old Teaching" represented by Ma Yinghuan and the sect propagated by Ma Laichi, despite some minor differences in religious rituals, essentially belonged to the same religion with no fundamental distinctions. Meanwhile, Ma Yinghuan's accusation that Ma Laichi advocated heterodox teachings was unfounded, and it was clarified that the "Mingsha" incident was an erroneous transmission of the scripture Mingsha.

As for the rumors of gathering to cause trouble, they actually stemmed from a misunderstanding of the situation. In fact, Hui Muslims gathered at the mosque during salat, but dispersed to their respective homes after the prayers, with no acts of gathering to stir up trouble. Later, due to the death of Hui Muslim Ma Bushi, his relative Ma Yinghu got into a fight with others while distributing youxiang (fried bread) during the funeral (the author also witnessed such phenomena during fieldwork: followers of the Hui "Old Teaching" distribute food and money at funerals, which often leads to scrambling among the poor, thereby triggering conflicts. However, in modern traditional funerals in Hezhou, distributed items are mostly coins, while food is rarely sought after, and scrambling behavior has generally decreased. Mosques have also actively responded to the call of the government (People's Government of Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture), requiring that the distribution of money be prohibited at funerals held in cemetery areas to prevent scrambling and fights). In the end, in the 13th year of the Qianlong reign (1735), Ma Yinghuan was punished in accordance with the principle of reciprocity for false accusation.

Then, how did an ordinary fight and a common sectarian conflict come to be regarded by the Qing court as incidents of promoting heresy and gathering crowds to engage in lawlessness?

First, since the Shunzhi period, "uprisings by Hui people" had frequently occurred in the northwest. The Hezhou zhi (Gazetteer of Hezhou, 1707 edition, the 46th year of the Kangxi reign) alone recorded many such incidents. This led to the formation of a widespread stereotype of Hui people among both high-ranking rulers and local officials—that they were fierce in folk customs, united, and prone to triggering social unrest. Therefore, they were deeply afraid that Ma Yinghuan's accusation case would further escalate into social upheaval.

Second, the traditional faction represented by Ma Yinghuan exploited the vigilance of the Qing court's upper echelons toward popular uprisings and religious issues, using the charge of "promoting heresy" to suppress emerging sects like that of Ma Laichi. For believers, conflicts between sects were seen as a contest over "faith" and "truth." Each sect claimed to uphold the orthodox path, while dismissing others as heretical teachings. The rise of a New Teaching would inevitably threaten the regional influence of existing sects, leading to a loss of followers and a rapid decline in associated wealth and interests. After all, the number of believers and the financial resources behind them were crucial to the rise and fall of a sect.

Since the Qing government lacked an in-depth understanding of the beliefs of northwest Muslims, its policies mostly focused on maintaining existing sects and suppressing emerging ones to preserve local order. However, these policies were often exploited by "existing Muslim sects" to deal with emerging ones. Notably, when menhuan (Sufi orders) first emerged, the traditional Gedimu faction reported Ma Laichi's Huasi menhuan to the Qing government on the grounds of spreading "heretical teachings." By the late Qianlong period, when Ma Mingxin's Jahriyya sect began to rise, Ma Guobao, the leader of the Huasi menhuan, similarly reported Ma Mingxin and others to the Qing government for spreading "heretical teachings," which directly led to a series of conflicts between the Qing government and the Jahriyya sect.

The lessons of these historical events for today are as follows: First, the government must fully understand the belief systems of marginalized groups to handle affairs in ethnic regions timely and accurately, preventing marginal issues from affecting the core. Second, the government needs to accurately grasp sectarian dynamics in ethnic regions and establish mechanisms to monitor and understand emerging forces, avoiding being drawn into sectarian disputes or exploited by any faction.

### 3. CONCLUSION

From an Islamic perspective, examining menhuan conflicts in Qing China during the 17th–18th centuries, we can similarly identify that part of the reason for menhuan conflicts in northwest China stemmed from internal divisions within Islam. As part of the Islamic world, Muslims in northwest China during the Qing Dynasty were naturally influenced by such divisions: new schools of thought and doctrines continued to be introduced into China through



missionary groups from the Islamic world and Chinese hajj pilgrims. The introduction of New Teachings constantly challenged the interests of existing local sects, leading to inevitable conflicts.

Meanwhile, when studying the actual situation of the 17th–18th centuries, we also find that the so-called "New Teaching" and "Old Teaching" among northwest Muslims in the Qing Dynasty were not strictly defined sects, but rather simple distinctions made by northwest Muslims based on the chronological emergence of sects. Thus, there was no "New Teaching" with strict doctrines and organizational structures in the Qing Dynasty. For example, Ma Laichi's Khufiyya was considered the "New Teaching" relative to the earlier Gedimu Muslims; yet when Ma Mingxin's Jahriyya emerged, Ma Laichi's Khufiyya had already become the "Old Teaching." By the late Qing Dynasty, when Ma Wanfu brought the Ikhwan from the Arab world, Ma Mingxin's Jahriyya had also become the "Old Teaching," and the Ikhwan was referred to as the "New Teaching." From this, we can conclude that over time, the Ikhwan will also become an "Old Teaching." Of course, when studying northwest menhuan conflicts, we should adopt a global historical perspective, while also attaching importance to local factors—which, to a large extent, were the primary ones. Therefore, researching the Muslim society in northwest China during the Qing Dynasty requires a thorough understanding of the overall social context of northwest China in the 17th–18th centuries.

Finally, the essence of the menhuan conflicts between Ma Laichi and Ma Mingxin during the Qianlong period had already been manifested in the conflicts between Ma Laichi and the Gedimu during the Yongzheng period. At its core, menhuan conflict was a struggle between sects for spheres of influence and interests. As for how menhuan conflicts gradually spiraled out of control and evolved into popular uprisings across the dynasty, this was caused by a series of complex factors. In short, the Qing government's lack of understanding of the Muslims under its rule, coupled with the corruption of local officials and stereotypes about Muslims, exacerbated the escalation of sectarian conflicts, which ultimately evolved into popular uprisings.

## ANNOTATION

① In the sixth year of the Qianlong reign (1741), Wanquan County implemented the tax and labor reform of "yi liang zai ding" (incorporating poll tax into land tax, i.e., levying poll silver by attaching it to farmland), which aroused strong dissatisfaction among the people. Some ringleaders, whom the government referred to as "diaogun" (rascals), organized crowds to protest, and incidents of destroying government office buildings occurred. During the same period, even more serious disturbances broke out in neighboring Anyi County (now Yuncheng Salt Lake District): over 700 people gathered, besieging the county seat, setting fires, resisting arrest, injuring people, and even demolishing memorial archways. In Yongji County, disputes over the border with Chaoyi and Huayin in Shaanxi led to the destruction of civilian houses. In his imperial edict, Emperor Qianlong characterized these incidents as "diaomin chengxiong" (rascal commoners acting violently). He emphasized that although Shanxi "has long been known for its simple and honest folk customs," the frequent occurrences of crowds assembling to resist officials in recent years stemmed from local officials' usual indulgence and dereliction of duty, failing to prevent minor issues from escalating into major problems.

② Youxiang is a traditional Chinese food made mainly from flour. Specifically, it is prepared by shaping flour into cakes and frying them until golden and puffy—that is youxiang. Hui Muslims often make youxiang during wedding ceremonies for newlyweds or religious ceremonies held when relatives pass away, distributing them to relatives, friends, and villagers. For details, see: Sheng Yun and Chang Geng, *Gansu Xintong zhi* (New Comprehensive Gazetteer of Gansu), Juan 11, carved edition of the first year of the Xuantong reign of the Qing Dynasty (1909). (No page number)

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