Indonesian Journal of Interdisciplinary Islamic Studies (IJIIS)
Vol. 8 No. 1 (2025)

THE ROLE OF SUFISM IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAM AMONG HUI MUSLIMS IN CHINA (7TH –19TH CENTURIES)

Mai Jianjun
International Islamic University Malaysia
*maijianjun@iium.edu.my

Article Info

Submitted	:	June 9, 2025	DOI: 10.20885/ijiis.vol8.iss1.art2
Accepted	:	July 22, 2025	
Published	:	July 22, 2025	

Abstract

This historiographical study investigates the role of Sufism in the development and continuity of Islam among Hui Muslims in China from the 7th to the 19th centuries. Using textual and historical analysis of Chinese chronicles, travel narratives, and Islamic educational materials, the study traces the institutional and doctrinal influence of Sufi thought across major Chinese dynasties. The study demonstrates that Sufism provided essential spiritual, intellectual, and organizational frameworks that enabled Hui Muslims to maintain their religious identity despite cultural assimilation, political pressure, and periods of severe persecution. During the Yuan dynasty, Sufi practices first gained institutional footing through the establishment of lodges (zawiya) in major cities. In the Ming period, Sufism's intellectual tradition became integrated into the innovative Jingtang Jiaoyu (scripture hall education) system, which preserved Islamic knowledge through traditional Chinese educational methods. The Qing dynasty witnessed the full institutionalization of Sufism through the emergence of formal Menhuan (Sufi orders)—including Khufiyya, Jahriyya, Qadiriyya, and Kubrawiyya—that established extensive networks of spiritual authority across China. Throughout these historical periods, Sufism served as a vital channel for the development of Islam among Hui Muslims in China, strengthening their faith and preserving their religious identity by providing crucial spiritual guidance and support.

Keywords: *China, Hui Muslims, Islam, Sufism*

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of Islam to China dates back to the Tang dynasty in the 7th century, as documented in Chinese historical records. Since that time, Muslim communities have firmly established themselves across the vast Chinese landscape, flourishing within a predominantly non-Muslim societal framework. Over the centuries, these communities expanded steadily, contributing to the formation of one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. Among the ten officially recognized Muslim ethnic groups in China, the Hui community occupies a particularly prominent and distinctive position, constituting nearly half of the country's total Muslim population.

Throughout the more than 1,300-year history of Islam in China, Sufism has played a pivotal role in both the propagation and preservation of Islamic faith, especially within Hui Muslim communities. This paper seeks to examine the critical contributions and unique influence of Sufism on the historical development, religious continuity, and communal resilience of the Hui Muslims from 7th to 19th century.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, historiographical approach that emphasizes textual analysis of imperial Chinese records, Muslim travelogues, genealogical manuscripts, and Chinese-language Islamic educational materials. Primary sources are analyzed in conjunction with relevant secondary scholarship in Islamic studies, Chinese history, and Sufi intellectual tradition to trace the evolution and localization of Sufi institutions and doctrines across dynastic periods.

The Arrival of Islam and Early Muslims During the Tang-Song Era

Chinese official historical records do not specify precisely when the earliest Muslims arrived in China. However, the *Jiu Tang Shu* (Old Tang History) documented the first diplomatic mission sent by Caliph Uthman ibn Affan in 651 CE (Yu Zhengui 2012, 11). This date is widely accepted among Chinese

historians as the most reliable marker for Islam's official introduction to China (Yu Zhengui 2012, 11).

Early Muslims traveled to China via two primary routes: the maritime route from the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea through South Asia and Southeast Asia to China's southern and eastern coasts; and the overland Silk Road route from the Arabian Peninsula and Persia through India and Central Asia to China's northwestern Xinjiang region.

During the 7th century, substantial numbers of Arab and Persian Muslim merchants arrived in China by sea, establishing communities in coastal port cities such as Guangzhou and Quanzhou. These merchants often settled permanently, developed commercial enterprises, acquired properties, and intermarried with local Chinese women. The Tang government implemented favorable policies toward these Muslim immigrants, designating special districts known as fanfang (foreign quarters) where foreigners could reside and conduct business activities (Jiu Tang Shu, ch. 177, 85). Within these fanfang, Muslims enjoyed considerable autonomy, including the freedom to practice their religion, maintain their cultural traditions, speak their native languages, and construct mosques for worship.

By the late Tang dynasty, a significant Muslim population had formed along China's southern and eastern coasts. The scale of this community is tragically evidenced by the rebellion led by Huang Chao in 879 CE, during which more than 120,000 foreigners were massacred in Guangzhou alone, the majority of whom were Muslims (*Jiu Tang Shu*, ch. 177, 85). This catastrophic event underscores both the substantial size of the Muslim community and its vulnerability during periods of political instability.

The Song government continued and expanded the Tang dynasty's welcoming policies toward foreign traders. Official diplomatic envoys were dispatched to Arab countries specifically to invite Muslim merchants to establish commercial relationships with China (Jiu Tang Shu, ch. 177, 27). Encouraged by this hospitable political and commercial environment, increasing numbers of Arab

and Persian Muslim merchants migrated to Song China, substantially enlarging the Muslim population (Qiu 2012, 30).

The evolving Chinese perception of Islam during this period is also reflected in the changing terminology used to describe the religion. During the Tang dynasty, Islam was often referred to as "Dashi fa", meaning "the law or customs of the Arabs (Dashi)," a term that emphasized its foreign and cultural dimensions, particularly as practiced by Arab and Persian merchants residing in China. However, by the Song dynasty, the term had shifted to "Dashi jiaodu", literally "the religion of the Arabs." This change in nomenclature signifies a deeper Chinese recognition of Islam not merely as a set of foreign customs, but as a structured religious tradition—similar in status to Buddhism or Daoism—deserving of formal religious categorization. This semantic transition illustrates an important evolution in the Chinese understanding of Islam as it became more visible, enduring, and embedded within the empire's religious landscape.

The demographic growth of Muslim communities during this period is evidenced by extensive cemeteries and the proliferation of mosques. Song writer Fang Xinru noted in his work *Nan Hai Bai Yong* that Muslim cemeteries in Guangzhou contained "more than several thousand [tombs], all oriented westward" toward Mecca (Qiu 2012, 53). Several of China's earliest mosques were constructed during this era, including the Ashab Mosque (Mosque of the Companions of the Prophet) built by Arab Muslims in 1009 CE, and the Qingjing Mosque (Mosque of Purity and Tranquility) constructed by a Persian Muslim in 1131 CE. Another important structure, later known as the Yemen Mosque, was built by a Yemeni Muslim and is believed to date from the 8th-9th centuries. The Huaisheng Mosque (Mosque Commemorating the Prophet) in Guangzhou is considered even older, with origins likely dating to the Tang dynasty (Qiu 2012, 52).

These architectural and funerary remains provide tangible evidence of the substantial and well-established Muslim communities that had formed in China

by the Song dynasty. The Muslims during this period maintained strong connections to their religious and cultural heritage while gradually integrating into Chinese society, establishing a foundation for the development of distinctive Chinese Muslim communities in subsequent centuries.

Early Sufi Presence in China During the Tang-Song Era

While maritime routes were crucial for the initial introduction of Islam to China, the overland Silk Road connecting Central Asia to China played a more significant role in the development and spread of Sufism within Chinese territories. These land routes facilitated not only commerce but also the transmission of Islamic mystical traditions that would eventually take root in China's northwestern regions.

From the 8th to 9th centuries, two non-Arab Islamic states emerged in Central Asia in succession, creating conditions favorable for Sufism's eastward expansion. The first was the Samanid Empire, established by Tajiks with its capital in Bukhara in the late 8th century. The Samanids cultivated a sophisticated Persian-Islamic culture that became a center for intellectual and spiritual development. The second significant state was the Karakhanid Khanate, founded by Turkic peoples in the mid-9th century. Historical narratives recount that the Karakhanid ruler, Satuk Bughra Khan (d. 344/955), converted to Islam through the dawah efforts of a Sufi preacher named Abu Hassan Muhammad Kalimat (Yu 2012, 42). This conversion represents an early instance of Sufism's influence on Central Asian leadership, which would subsequently affect regions bordering China.

The progressive Islamization of Central Asia had profound implications for the spread of Sufism into Chinese territories. By the late Tang period, Sufi presence had become established in China's northwestern regions. A particularly noteworthy historical event occurred in 905 CE, when the renowned and controversial Sufi mystic Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj journeyed through India

and Central Asia, eventually reaching Turfan (in present-day Xinjiang, China) (Schimmel 1975, 67). Although detailed accounts of al-Hallaj's activities in Turfan are absent from historical records, his journey represents tangible evidence of early Sufi penetration into Chinese territories. Zhou argues that al-Hallaj's expedition to Turfan demonstrates that by the early 10th century at the latest, Sufi missionaries had already entered China's northwestern frontier regions bordering Central Asia and had initiated Islamic proselytization efforts (Zhou 2012, 512).

Historical sources indicate that during the late Song dynasty, two Islamic scholars arrived at the Beijing Niujie (Ox Street) Mosque and served as imams. One scholar originated from Persia, while the other, Ali, came from Bukhara and both are believed to be Sufi practitioners. Their graves remain within the mosque grounds to this day (Zhou 2012, 512). Another prominent figure, Sheikh Buhadin (possibly Burhan al-Din in Arabic), traveled to Yangzhou in southeastern China, where he constructed one of China's most historically significant mosques, the Xianhe Mosque (Mosque of the Crane). He is also traditionally regarded as a Sufi preacher who disseminated sufi teachings in eastern China (Yu 2012, 42). However, it must be acknowledged that direct documentary evidence supporting these attributions remains limited.

Beyond these accounts, official historical records from the Tang and Song dynasties provide minimal information about Sufism and the activities of Sufi scholars during this era. This historiographical gap reflects several realities: first, Chinese court historians may have had limited understanding of or interest in the internal distinctions within Islamic practice; second, early Sufi practitioners in China likely maintained a low profile while establishing their communities; and third, many Sufi practices may have been transmitted through oral traditions rather than written documents, making them less visible in official histories.

Despite the limited documentary evidence, these early Sufi contacts established foundations for the later flourishing of Sufism in China during

subsequent dynasties, particularly the Yuan when Sufism would become a more prominent feature of Chinese Islamic practice.

Sufism in Yuan Dynasty

The rise of the Mongol Empire in the 13th century fundamentally transformed the religious landscape across Asia. Beginning with their conquests of Central Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Europe, the Mongols eventually directed their military campaigns toward China. In 1258, Baghdad fell to the Mongol army, resulting in the destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate. By 1279, the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty had completed its conquest of the Chinese Song Dynasty, bringing all of China under Mongol rule (Yu 2012, 74).

The Mongol conquests facilitated an unprecedented influx of Muslims from Arabia, Persia, and Central Asia into China. As the Mongol armies subjugated Muslim territories, they systematically relocated large numbers of Muslim artisans, scholars, and merchants to China. Consequently, the Muslim population in China increased dramatically. These Muslim war captives, together with the established Muslim migrants from the Tang-Song era, formed a distinctive Muslim ethnic group known as the Hui. Starting from the Yuan dynasty, for the first time in Chinese history, Hui Muslims were officially documented in the government household registration system (Qiu 2012, 101). The Yuan administration created a separate household category for Hui Muslims called "HuihuiHu" (Huihui household) among various other household categories such as "MengguHu" (Mongol household), "HanrenHu" (Chinese household), and others (Qiu 2012, 101).

Significantly, the Mongol rulers relied heavily on Muslims as administrators, tax collectors, and military advisors, particularly in the western and southern provinces. The Yuan government implemented a caste-like socio-political hierarchy in which Mongols occupied the highest status, Muslims and other Central and West Asian peoples were ranked second, and the Han Chinese and

other groups were relegated to the third and fourth classes (Qiu 2012, 101). This elevated political and social standing of Muslims under Mongol rule facilitated the growth of Islamic institutions, including Sufi networks and lodges. The favorable environment created by this stratification allowed Sufism to expand more openly and gain official recognition, especially in urban centers where Hui communities were concentrated. The increased patronage, autonomy, and institutional space available to Muslims under the Yuan administration directly contributed to the consolidation of Sufi practices and the establishment of Sufi institutions across China.

Moreover, the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty effectively eliminated borders between China and Central Asian countries, creating a vast unified empire where people could move with unprecedented freedom. This political unification allowed numerous Muslim scholars and merchants from Central Asia and the Middle East to enter China, including a significant number of Sufi preachers who brought their mystical traditions eastward.

The earliest explicit accounts of Sufism in China appear in official historical records from the Yuan Dynasty in the late 13th century. The Annals of the Yuan Dynasty mention "wandering dervishes" and provide valuable insight into their social and legal status:

> "Daneshmand (Persian: Islamic scholars) and Dervish households residing in Hui-hui (Muslim) temples without property or occupation shall be exempted from taxation. However, those engaged in business activities shall be taxed according to the regulations for Hui-hui households" (Zhou 2002, 23).

This excerpt reveals that the Yuan government officially recognized Sufis (Dervish) as a distinct category alongside Islamic scholar. Some Sufis renounced worldly possessions to reside in mosques dedicated to spiritual practices and the Sufi path, while others engaged in commercial activities. The Chinese term "Hui-hui temples" during this period encompassed both conventional mosques and specialized Sufi lodges (zawiya).

Further compelling evidence of Sufism's presence in China during the Yuan period comes from the detailed account of the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta, who journeyed through China in 1346. During his extensive travels along the southern and eastern coasts, he documented several significant encounters with Sufi practices and institutions. In Guangzhou, Ibn Battuta met a remarkably long-lived man—reportedly 200 years old—living in a cave outside the city who exhibited distinctly Sufi characteristics in his ascetic lifestyle. The traveler noted that "devotees visited him daily," indicating the hermit's considerable spiritual influence within the local Muslim community (Zhou 2002, 27).

Continuing his journey to Quanzhou, Ibn Battuta encountered Sheikh Burhan al-Din of Kazeruni (known in Chinese records as "Xia Buluhan Ding of Kazerun," 1229-1370). Remarkably, despite being 120 years old, Burhan al-Din remained "vigorous as a middle-aged man" and was widely revered as "She Si Lian" (Sheikh al-Islam), indicating his preeminent religious authority. He had overseen the reconstruction of the Qingjing Mosque—one of the earliest ancient mosques in China—and served as its imam. Ibn Battuta specifically reported that Sheikh Burhan al-Din had constructed a Sufi lodge (zawiya) outside the city and regularly engaged in Sufi devotional practices and teaching activities (Zhou 2002, 27).

In Hangzhou, Ibn Battuta encountered the descendants of an Egyptian named Uthman who maintained ownership of a Sufi lodge called "al-Uthmaniyya." The traveler described this establishment as "beautifully constructed, endowed with abundant charitable funds," and noted that it housed a dedicated group of Sufi practitioners. The family had maintained a longstanding tradition of supporting dervishes and Sufi activities (Zhou 2002, 27). Zhou argues that "al-Uthmaniyya" may represent the earliest organized Sufi order documented in China. Ibn Battuta also reported the existence of a Sufi lodge in Beijing, (Zhou 2002, 27) demonstrating that such institutions had spread to the imperial capital.

These historical records from both Chinese administrative documents and foreign traveler accounts conclusively confirm that Sufism had established a

significant institutional presence throughout Yuan Dynasty China. The geographical distribution of Sufi lodges—from southern coastal cities to the northern capital—demonstrates the widespread influence and acceptance of Sufism during this period.

Sufism and Islamic Education in the Ming Dynasty

In 1368, the Mongol Yuan dynasty was overthrown by Zhu Yuanzhang, who established the Chinese Ming dynasty. The new regime swiftly implemented a comprehensive series of laws aimed at Sinicizing minority groups, with particularly stringent measures targeting Mongols and Hui Muslims. These systematic policies banned foreign languages, surnames, and traditional dress, while simultaneously prohibiting marriages within these ethnic groups and mandating intermarriage with Han Chinese. Among these far-reaching assimilation efforts, two specific policies had especially devastating impacts on Islamic practice and the cultural identity of Hui Muslims in China.

The first critical policy was the Ming language ban. During the Yuan dynasty, Hui Muslims maintained a rich multilingual tradition, speaking Arabic, Persian, Turkic languages, and Chinese. While they used Chinese in public and commercial settings, Arabic served as the lingua franca within their communities and was essential for religious practice (Qiu. 2012, 262). The comprehensive prohibition of foreign languages caused the Hui to gradually lose proficiency in their ancestral tongues of Arabic and Persian, eventually rendering many unable to understand the Qur'an, hadith, and other foundational religious texts without specialized training.

The second major factor was the Ming Dynasty's isolationist foreign policy, which systematically severed connections between Chinese Muslims and the broader Islamic world. The notorious Sea Ban (hai jin) policy, strictly enforced beginning in 1371 and continuing well into the early Qing dynasty, effectively halted China's maritime trade and cultural exchange (Yu. 2012, 113). By the mid-

Ming period, Islamic scholarship in China faced an existential crisis: "there was a big shortage of Islamic books, and learned men were few, the transmission and interpretation [of the texts] were not clear, propagating the Truth became impossible (Qiu. 2012, 355)."

Despite these formidable challenges, Sufism demonstrated remarkable resilience in China, though official court records contain little explicit evidence of Sufi preachers' activities during this period of heightened cultural suppression. Instead, Sufism's profound influence manifested through an innovative Islamic educational system developed by Sheikh Hu Dengzhou (1522-1597), known as Jingtang Jiaoyu (Scripture Hall Education). This pioneering approach ingeniously integrated traditional Chinese educational methods with Islamic studies, creating a sustainable framework for religious knowledge transmission under restrictive conditions. The textbooks and curriculum employed in this system provide compelling evidence of Sufism's profound impact on Islamic education during this transformative era.

The scholarly journeys and intellectual pursuits of sheikh Hu Dengzhou and his disciples reveal that Sufi writings occupied a central place in their educational methodology. According to *The Genealogy of Classical Learning Transmission*, sheikh Hu Dengzhou encountered a "turbaned elder from the Heavenly Land (Arabia)" who gifted him the book Muqamat (Arabic: Maqāmāt), described reverentially as "a scripture unseen in this land." (Ha Baoyu. 2010, 129) In the Sufi tradition, Maqāmāt refers to the sequential stages of spiritual experiences encountered during the mystic's journey toward divine union. Chinese Muslims appropriately conceptualized these as "stages of spiritual advancement" within their own religious framework (Zhou 2002, 27). Zhou suggest that the specific text sheikh Hu Dengzhou received was likely *Maqāmāt Sayyidina* by Ṣalāḥ al-Mubārak, a significant Naqshbandi Sufi work that subsequently became highly influential among Chinese Muslim communities across the northwestern provinces (Zhou 2002, 27).

The transmission of Sufi knowledge continued through several generations of notable disciples of sheikh Hu Dengzhou. Ma Minglong, a third-generation disciple of Sheikh Hu Dengzhou initially found his religious training insufficient until fortuitously meeting a "profoundly learned Sufi master from the Western Regions" while traveling in Hubei province. After just one month of intensive study under this master's guidance, Ma reportedly gained deep insight into the mystical path that had previously eluded him. Similarly, Chang Zhimei, a fourth-generation disciple based in Jining, encountered a visiting Sufi master who gifted him a detailed commentary on another key text, *Mirsad*. Through diligent comparative study of various commentaries, Chang was able to decipher most of their esoteric meanings, though he acknowledged that some mystical ambiguities remained beyond his full comprehension (Zhou 2002, 29).

Several significant Sufi works formed the core curriculum of Jingtang jiaoyui (scriptural hall education), establishing a distinctive intellectual lineage. *Mirṣād al-ʿIbād min al-Mabdaʾ ila al-Maʿād* ("The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return") was authored by Abū Bakr Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī (d. 1256), a leading figure of the Central Asian Kubrawiyya Sufi order. This comprehensive spiritual guide systematically outlined the seeker's journey toward communion with the Divine, beginning with theoretical foundations and progressing through practical disciplines. Another central text was *Lama'at* (Flashes of Light) by Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī (d. 1289), which passionately articulated the doctrine of the unity of divine love through both prose and poetry. The influential commentary *Ashiʿat al-Lamaʿāt* by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 1492) further popularized this work among Chinese Muslims, establishing it as a core text widely regarded as the pinnacle of mystical theology in the curriculum (Zhou 2002, 28).

In the late Ming and early Qing periods, distinguished Islamic scholars affiliated with the Jingtang Jiaoyu (scriptural hall education) movement initiated a systematic effort to translate Islamic texts into Chinese, responding to the linguistic challenges faced by their communities. Many significant Sufi works

were translated during this period, with some texts like *Mirsad* receiving multiple translations by different scholars. This ambitious translation movement extended Sufi thought beyond the confines of specialized seminaries, exerting broader cultural and intellectual influence throughout Chinese Muslim society.

The intricate relationship between Jingtang Jiaoyu (scriptural hall education) and Sufi doctrines offers a clear interpretive framework for understanding Islam's development in inland China during this period of relative isolation. Although Jingtang education primarily aimed to transmit essential religious knowledge and train imams for community leadership, it distinctively elevated "the study of metaphysics and spiritual principles" (xingli zhi xue) to the most advanced level of its curriculum (Zhou 2002, 28). In the prestigious seminary established by the renowned scholar She Qiling (1638-1703), texts such as *al-Maqṣad*, *Mirsad*, *Lama'at*, and *Maqāmāt* formed the highest tier of study alongside traditional theological and jurisprudential works (Zhou 2002, 28). With the majority of advanced texts being Sufi in nature, the nationwide expansion of Jingtang Jiaoyu (Scriptural Hall Education) effectively functioned as a vehicle for the dissemination of Sufi teachings throughout China's diverse Muslim communities.

This educational framework not only preserved Islamic knowledge during a period of cultural pressure but also fostered a distinctively Chinese approach to Islamic mysticism that would continue to evolve in subsequent centuries, laying the groundwork for the flourishing of organized Sufi orders during the Qing dynasty.

Sufi Orders in the Qing Dynasty

In 1644, the Ming dynasty collapsed, and the Manchu Qing took power in China. The Manchu Qing's policy toward Islam and Muslims in China was characterized primarily by discrimination, persecution, and systematic suppression. Though the Hui Muslims had already undergone substantial

acculturation into Chinese society through the Sinicization process during the Ming dynasty, they were still regarded as "Others" and perceived as potential threats to Manchu Qing rule. Discriminatory laws and policies were systematically implemented to curb the development of Islam and restrict Hui Muslim communities. The Hui Muslims faced one of the greatest existential challenges since their ancestors first arrived in China centuries earlier. Yusuf Chang estimates that more than 10 million Hui Muslims during the Qing period perished in the Manchu Qing's genocidal campaigns (Yusuf 1987, 65). Under such oppressive conditions, the Hui Muslims were forced to maintain an extremely low profile to survive.

However, during this same period, Sufism experienced significant developments and transformations throughout the Islamic world, particularly in South Asia and Central Asia. The 17th and 18th centuries witnessed the revival of major Sufi orders, their expansion into new geographical regions, and the articulation of innovative Sufi doctrines and practices. These broader developments would profoundly influence the spread and evolution of Sufism within China, providing spiritual resources that helped sustain Islamic identity under severe pressure.

Historian Michael Dillon argues that the spread of Sufism across Central Asia played a crucial role in strengthening and revitalizing Islam in China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He suggests it may have been the decisive factor that prevented the complete absorption and assimilation of the Hui Muslims into the Han majority and Confucian cultural system. Dillon further contends that Sufism "was an ideal vehicle for the Hui to accommodate outwardly to prevailing Chinese, or Han, or Confucian tradition, while preserving their own Islamic culture (Dillon 1999, 112)." As government persecution intensified under the Qing, Sufism became an extraordinarily effective mechanism for sustaining the Hui Muslims' faith and Islamic practices, providing robust spiritual support

through ritualized remembrance of God (zikr) and other devotional practices that could be performed discreetly.

The development of Sufism in China during the Qing dynasty exhibited distinct developmental characteristics when contrasted with earlier dynastic periods. During the Yuan dynasty, Sufi influence was primarily driven by large-scale public missionary activities, with numerous Sufi practitioners engaging in open proselytization across imperial territories. The Ming dynasty saw a transformative shift toward systematized knowledge transmission: advanced Sufi teachings were initially introduced by itinerant scholars from Central and West Asia, subsequently studied and taught by Hui intellectuals through systematic Islamic education system. By contrast, the Qing era marked an institutional paradigm shift. Its influence manifested through the emergence of formal Sufi orders, which systematized spiritual practices, established hierarchical structures, and anchored mystical traditions within localized socioreligious frameworks. This tripartite evolution—from populist Yuan-era dissemination to Ming scholarly mediation and finally Qing institutional consolidation—reflects the progressive institutionalization of Sufism within China's evolving religious landscape.

During the Manchu Qing period, Sufi orders were introduced to Hui Muslims in China through four distinct channels. The first was through Hui Islamic scholars who brought Sufi teachings to China from Arab countries after completing the hajj pilgrimage or pursuing advanced religious studies abroad. These scholar-pilgrims often returned with new spiritual insights, texts, and initiations into Sufi orders. The second channel was through dedicated Sufi missionaries who traveled eastward from Central Asia and the Middle East, bringing established Sufi traditions directly to Chinese Muslim communities. The third channel was through Sufi preachers operating in Xinjiang, China's westernmost region bordering Central Asia, who transmitted teachings to Hui communities in inland China. The fourth channel emerged when indigenous Hui

Islamic scholars, having studied Sufi books and teachings, established a new Sufi order (Ma Tong 2000, 85).

In China, Sufi orders became known as "Menhuan", a term specific to Chinese Islamic tradition. According to Ma Tong, this designation was first employed by one of the leaders of the Jahriyya Sufi group and is believed to correspond conceptually to the Arabic word "silsila"—the chain of hereditary spiritual authority transmitted from sheikh to disciple (Ma Tong 2000, 85). Four major Menhuan emerged in China: Khufiyya, Jahriyya, Qadiriyya, and Kubrawiyya. Each of these major Menhuan subsequently developed numerous branches scattered across different geographical locations throughout China. Though belonging to the same overarching Sufi order, there was typically no direct organizational link between branches for the transmission of spiritual authority (silsila), and each branch operated, taught, and exercised its religious authority independently, creating a decentralized network of Sufi communities.

Khufiyya is from Arabic "khafi", means concealed or hidden. This Sufi order advocates that zikr (remembrance of God) should be recited in a low voice or silently. Known in Chinese as "Hufeiye", this order established more than ten branches throughout China. The most influential was the Huasi Menhuan founded by Sheikh Ma Laichi (1681-1766). In 1728, Sheikh Ma Laichi undertook the hajj pilgrimage and subsequently spent several years studying in Yemen, Cairo, and Baghdad. Upon returning to China in 1734, he immediately began propagating the Khufiyya Sufi order, attracting numerous followers among the Hui Muslims. His missionary activities extended beyond Muslim communities to include non-Muslims, particularly Tibetans and Han Chinese. Historical narratives describe Sheikh Ma Laichi's extensive da'wah efforts among Tibetan communities, including accounts of his living among Tibetans and converting them to Islam through various methods, including theological debates with local Buddhist spiritual leaders (referred to as "Huofo" or living Buddhas) (Ma Tong 2000, 152). The enduring impact of these conversion efforts is evident today, as many Muslim

Tibetans in Xunhua, Tongren, and Karegang in Qinghai province trace their religious heritage to these early converts during Sheikh Ma Laichi's time. After years of dedicated missionary work, Sheikh Ma Laichi's following reportedly grew to more than two hundred thousand disciples at its peak, with the total adherents of all Khufiyya Menhuan branches exceeding half a million throughout China (Ma Tong 2000, 152).

Jahriyya is from Arabic "jahr" meaning open or overt. This order advocates reciting zikr loudly. Consequently, in China, this Sufi order became known as "gaonian pai" (the reciting-aloud group) in contrast to Khufiyya, which was called "dinian pai" (the reciting-silently group) (Ma Tong 2000, 271). Known in Chinese as "Zheherenye", Jahriyya became the most numerous and widely dispersed Menhuan in China. Its founder, Sheikh Ma Mingxin (1719-1781), had studied in a Sufi school in Yemen since the age of ten. In 1744, at age twenty-six, he returned to his hometown in Xunhua, Qinghai province. His exceptional knowledge, personal charisma, and several reformist principles—such as opposition to religious leaders' accumulation of wealth through donations, rejection of grandiose mosques with elaborate decorations, and advocacy for Sufi succession based on spiritual merit rather than heredity—resonated strongly with many Muslims in the region. His teachings attracted numerous followers, including some who had previously adhered to the dominant Khufiyya Menhuan. Sheikh Ma Mingxin initiated his mission in Xunhua, Qinghai province, and the Jahriyya subsequently expanded throughout Gansu, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Hebei, Jilin, and Shandong provinces (Ma Tong 2000, 273).

However, this shifting of allegiances became a major source of conflict between the two dominant Sufi orders. In response to the growing influence of the Jahriyya, the Qing authorities adopted a divide-and-rule strategy known as "using Hui to control Hui" (*yi Hui zhi Hui*), deliberately supporting the Khufiyya order against the Jahriyya. This policy exacerbated sectarian tensions and ultimately provoked armed resistance from Jahriyya adherents. The ensuing

clashes led to severe and widespread repression by the Qing government. Sheikh Ma Mingxin, the founder of the Jahriyya, along with numerous other prominent leaders and tens of thousands of followers, were executed during the Qing campaigns to suppress the order. At one point, the Jahriyya was officially banned by imperial decree across the empire (Ma Tong 2000, 177). Despite these devastating persecutions, the Jahriyya survived by going underground—its resilience sustained by the inherently secretive and decentralized nature of Sufi networks. Remarkably, following the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the Jahriyya reemerged and experienced significant growth. It has since continued to function as one of the major Sufi orders among Hui Muslims in China to the present day.

The Qadiriyya, one of the oldest Sufi orders in the Islamic world, was among the earliest to be firmly established on Chinese soil. It was introduced to China by Khoja Abdullah, reportedly the 29th descendant of Prophet Muhammad, during the early years of the Qing Kangxi emperor's reign (1661-1722). In China, the Qadiriyya (known in Chinese as "Gadelinye") was primarily propagated by the Da Gongbei Menhuan and fourteen affiliated branches. The founder of the Da Gongbei Menhuan was Sheikh Qi Jingyi, a renowned religious scholar who served as imam of a mosque in Gansu province. The Qadiriyya in China was distinctive for advocating extended periods of isolated meditation, voluntary poverty, and vows of celibacy among its advanced practitioners (Ma Tong 2000, 229).

The fourth major Sufi order in China is the Kubrawiyya (known in Chinese as "Kuburenye"). The founder of this Sufi tradition in China was an Arab Sufi named Muhyiddin, who arrived in China and began preaching Islam in the early 1600s. During his final journey at the end of the Ming dynasty, he settled in Dawantou village in Dongxiang, Gansu province, adopting the Chinese name Zhang Puji. Consequently, this order was also known as the Dawantou Menhuan in China (Ma Tong 2000, 333). Sheikh Zhang Puji and his descendants preached

to Hui and Dongxiang Muslims as well as non-Muslim Han Chinese, attracting substantial numbers of followers from diverse backgrounds.

The early founders of Menhuan propagated Islam and recruited followers through systematic family visitation campaigns. They conducted door-to-door outreach, a practice known in Chinese as "xunqiu menhu" — literally "seeking doors (Jin Yijiu, 1984)." Once a significant following had been established, they would construct a "daotang", a Sufi hospice equivalent to the Arabic "zawiya." As communities grew, Menhuan followers would build their own mosques. However, within this hierarchical structure, the daotang maintained a higher status than conventional mosques. The daotang administered affiliated mosques, with imams appointed by Menhuan leaders based at the daotang. In some cases, a single daotang governed several or even dozens of mosques throughout a region, creating an extensive network of spiritual authority and religious instruction (Jin Yijiu 1984, 40).

This organizational structure enabled Sufi orders to maintain cohesion and transmit Islamic teachings despite governmental repression, establishing a resilient institutional framework that would allow the Hui Muslim communities to preserve their religious identity throughout the challenges of the Qing dynasty and into the modern era.

CONCLUSION

Between the 7th and 19th centuries, Sufism played a foundational role in the development, transmission, and continuity of Islam among Hui Muslim communities in China. From its earliest presence via maritime and overland routes, Sufi doctrines and institutions progressively embedded themselves within diverse Chinese socio-political contexts. During the Yuan dynasty, Sufism gained institutional recognition through the establishment of lodges and the documented influence of charismatic Sufi figures. In the Ming dynasty, despite intense state-imposed isolation and cultural assimilation policies, Sufi metaphysics found new

life through the development of Jingtang Jiaoyu (Scripture Hall Education). In the Qing period, Sufism underwent further institutional consolidation through the emergence of formal Sufi orders (Menhuan), which localized spiritual authority and enabled religious continuity under conditions of marginalization and repression.

This study contributes to the broader field of Islamic studies by highlighting how Sufism functioned not merely as a mystical tradition, but as a vehicle for Islam's survival, adaptation, and localization in a non-Muslim majority context. It adds to the growing body of historiography that explores Islam beyond the Arab heartlands—demonstrating how Islamic thought and practice were reshaped through their encounter with Chinese civilization. The experience of Hui Muslims illustrates that Islamic tradition, far from being monolithic, is highly flexible and contextually responsive, particularly through the prism of Sufism.

On a global level, the Chinese case provides an important example of how Islamic spirituality and communal identity can be preserved and revitalized across linguistic, cultural, and political boundaries. It shows that Sufi networks, with their emphasis on ethical discipline, spiritual intimacy, and institutional resilience, played a critical role in embedding Islam within pluralistic societies. As Islamic communities today navigate challenges of globalization, identity, and minority existence, the historical trajectory of Sufism in China offers enduring insights into the possibilities of religious continuity, adaptation, and renewal.

REFERENCE

Ben-Dor Benite, Z. (2005). *The Dao of Muhammad: A cultural history of Muslims in late imperial China.* Harvard University Press.

Dillon, Michael. (1999). *China's Muslim Hui Community*. London: Curzon Press.

Ha Guangtian. (2014). Dialectic of embodiment: Mysticism, materiality and the performance of Sufism in China. *Performing Islam*, Vol. 3, No. 1 & 2.Jin, Yijiu. (1984). The System of Menhuan in China: An Influence of Sufism on Chinese Muslims. *Ming Studies*, No. 19. pp.34-45.

Juvaini, Ala-ad-Din 'Ata-Malik. (1958). The History of The World Conqueror. English translation by Boyle, John Andrew. Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Ma Tong. (2000). *Zhongguo yisilan jiaopai yu menhuan zhidu shilue* [The Brief History of Islamic Sections and Menhuan in China]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press.

Petersen, Kristian. (2018). Interpreting Islam in China: Pilgrimage, Scripture, and Language in the Han Kitab. Oxford University Press.

Qu Shusen. (2012). *Zhongguo huizu shi* [History of the Hui in China]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press.Sen Tan Ta. (2009). Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

Shao Ming & Hu Yubing. (2021). *Qingdai hanwen yisilan dianji keying shulue* [A Tentative Study On Publication Of Chinese Islamic Classics In Qing Dynasty]. *Journal of North Minzu Univeristy,* No. 1. pp 96-104.

Wang Jinzhai. (2013) *Zhongguo jindai huijiao wenhua shiliao* [The History of Islamic Education in Modern China]. In Din Shiren (ed.) *Zhongguo yisilan jintang jiaoyu* [Islamic Scripture Hall Education in China] (pp.17-30). Lanzhou: Gansu People's Press.Xilalunding. (2013).*Jintangyu yanjiu* [Study on Scripture Hall Language]. In Din Shiren (ed.) *Zhongguo yisilan jintang jiaoyu* [Islamic Scripture Hall Education in China] (pp151-161). Lanzhou: Gansu People's Press.

Yang Huaizhong & Yu Zhengui. (1995). *Yisilanjiao yu zhongguo wenhua* [Islam and Chinese Culture]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press.

Yusuf, Chang (1987) The Hui (Muslim) Minority in China: An Historical Overview. *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol, 8, No. 1. pp. 62-78.

Yu Zhengui (2012). *Zhongguo lidai zhengquan yu yisilanjiao* [China's Successive Governments and Islam]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press.

Zhou, Xiefan. (2002). *Sufei zhuyi yu mingqing zhiji de yisilajiao* [Sufism and Chinese Islam During the Ming and Qing Period]. *Journal of the Second Northwest University for Nationalities*, Vol, 53, No. 1. pp. 23-34.