



The Opposition of a Leading Akhund to Shi'a and Sufi Shaykhs in Mid-Nineteenth-Century China

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Abstract

This article traces the activities of Ma Dexin, a preeminent Hui Muslim scholar and grand imam (akhund) who played a leading role in the Muslim uprising in Yunnan (1856–1873). Ma harshly criticized Shi'ism and its followers, the shaykhs, in the Sufi orders in China. The intolerance of orthodox Sunnis toward Shi'ism can be explained in part by the marginalization of Hui Muslims in China and their attempts to unite and defend themselves in a society dominated by Han Chinese. An analysis of the Sunni opposition to Shi'ism that was led by Akhund Ma Dexin and the Shi'a sect's influence among the Sufis in China help us understand the ways in which global debates in Islam were articulated on Chinese soil.

Keywords: Ma Dexin, Shi'a, shaykh, Chinese Islam, Hui Muslims

Most of the more than twenty-three million Muslims in China are Sunnis who follow Hanafi jurisprudence when applying Islamic law (*shari'a*). Presently, only a very small percentage (less than 1 percent) of Chinese Muslims are Shi'a.¹ The historian Raphael Israeli explicitly analyzes the profound impact of Persian Shi'ism on the Sufi orders in China based on the historical development and doctrinal teachings of Chinese Muslims (2002, 147–167). The question of Shi'a influence explored in this article concerns why Ma Dexin, a preeminent Chinese Muslim scholar, a great imam, and one of the key leaders of the Muslim uprising in the nineteenth century, so harshly criticized Shi'ism and its accomplices, the shaykhs, in certain Sufi orders in China, even though Shi'a Islam was nearly invisible at that time. Understanding this opposition to Shi'ism and Shi'a influence among the Sufi shaykhs in China should help us better understand Chinese Islam and, in particular, Chinese Muslims as a marginalized population struggling to defend Islam's unity, revitalize its religious identity, and survive in a society dominated politically, culturally, and ideologically by Confucianism and, more recently, Communism.

Ma Dexin and His Role in Chinese Islam

Ma Dexin (1794–1874) was one of the four greatest akhunds (the Persian term for an Islamic teacher and cleric) in the modern history of Islam in China. He was born into an Islamic cleric's family in Taihe County, Tali Prefecture, Yunnan, where Islam has left an indelible trace in China. Originally named Fuchu in classical Chinese style (the name literally means “to return the original essentiality”), Ma also had an Arabic name: Yusuf. In his later years he was honored by Yunnanese Muslims as “Ruh al-Din,” the “Spirit of Religion.” According to Ma Anli (dates of birth and death unknown), a disciple of Ma Dexin who translated several of his Arabic writings and also collaborated with him to write Islamic works in elegant classical Chinese, Ma Dexin was a twenty-first-generation descendant of Sayyid al-Ajall Shams al-Din Umar (1211–1279), Yunnan's provincial governor during the Yuan dynasty (Ma Anli 1952). Sayyid al-Ajall's original hometown was in Bukhara in Central Asia, and he was a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (Song, Zhao, and Wang 1976). Therefore, Ma Dexin was considered a *sayyid*, an Arabic term that denotes descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

As a child, Ma was tutored in Arabic and Persian and various Islamic texts by his father, an imam. In his youth, Ma traveled to Chang'an (today's Xi'an) in Shaanxi Province and studied Islam and the Quran, supervised by a knowledgeable Islamic scholar and akhund. Having studied many Islamic subjects in northwestern China, Ma returned to Yunnan and became the akhund of a mosque and was put in charge of a *madrassa* (an Islamic college that trains akhunds or imams), leading prayers and generally overseeing Islamic affairs in a large Muslim community. Gradually, Ma became known throughout the province as a madrasa teacher (*jingshi*) and akhund. Unsatisfied with what he had learned at the madrasa in China, Ma made a pilgrimage to Mecca, and during his journey he furthered his studies in Mecca and Medina, the center of the Islamic world. Taking advantage of the hajj mission, he also undertook academic tours of Cairo, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Cyprus, Istanbul, Rhodes, Aden, Singapore, and other places, where he met with Islamic scholars and religious leaders in a wide circle, discussing the proper interpretation of Islamic doctrine and theology.²

During his travels, Ma collected many Islamic books (see Ma Dexin [1861] 1988, 64–65). After eight fruitful years, he completed this hajj and Islamic study mission and returned to Yunnan, where he resumed his position as a madrasa teacher in several prominent Muslim communities of Yunnan, first teaching in Lin'an Town (in today's Jianshui County), then in Huilong Village (Lin'an County), and eventually in Daying (Yuxi County). These were all important Hui Muslim communities and centers of Islamic culture. Ma not only taught

Islamic texts and doctrines but also presided over religious services and helped to interpret Islamic law for Muslim communities in the region. Through his efforts, Islamic education flourished in Yunnan in the 1850s, attracting many Islamic scholars from other parts of the province who gathered around him and often sought his advice, guidance, or personal views on Islamic doctrine and Islamic law. Ma's reputation as an expert Islamic scholar grew to such an extent that Muslims in Yunnan and even in other parts of China bestowed on him the honorific "Old Bapa" (in Persian a *bapa* is an elderly scholar esteemed for his moral authority and knowledge, particularly Arabic Quranic knowledge) (Na and Ma 1994, 327–328).

During the 1850s, however, Yunnan Muslims plunged into bloody conflicts arising out of political crises and ethnic tensions, and China's socioeconomic situation deteriorated. Moreover, as the bureaucratic politics of the imperial government grew more and more oppressive and venal, imperial authorities turned a hard hand against Muslim ethnic minorities. Corruption among both the central and local authorities greatly hindered administrative efficiency, leading to the failure of jurisprudential efforts to mediate the confrontation between the Hui Muslims and the Han. Thus, the imperial system lost control over the administration of justice in the province. These conditions eventually led the Hui Muslims in Yunnan to mount a large-scale insurgency against the imperial government.

When the large armed Hui rebellion against the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) broke out in 1856, Grand Akhund Ma Dexin was selected by the Hui Muslims as the spiritual leader and one of the main military commanders due to his prestige and enormous influence among their communities. Ma called on Muslims in southeastern and northeastern Yunnan to participate in this uprising against the ethnic discrimination that was routinely carried out by local imperial authorities. He also advocated for close cooperation with another Hui Muslim uprising in western Yunnan that was led by Du Wenxiu (1827–1872). As a result, rebellious Hui Muslim forces won control over two-thirds of Yunnan Province and three times laid siege to the provincial capital.

Still, Ma Dexin saw so many innocent people lose their lives because of this bloody confrontation and so many people desert their homes and become refugees, leading miserable, even hopeless, lives due to ethnic cleansing practiced by both the Hui and the Han, that he sought a way out of the bloodshed. Such a cruel reality, in which many people died every day and many more faced starvation, drove Ma to forge a compromise with the imperial authorities on behalf of the Hui forces, agreeing to a ceasefire and finally yielding to the authorities and signing a peace agreement.

As a result of his leadership during the uprising, Ma became known as a *beg* (a Turkish title for a Muslim nobleman) of the second rank and was given the title “Islamic Chief in General for Hui Muslims of Southern Yunnan” by the Qing imperial court (Zhang 1988, 5).³ Following the bloody suppression of the Muslim insurgency in western Yunnan, however, the Qing government sentenced Ma to death in 1874 without charges and even used a false accusation against him. Apparently the imperial authorities feared his vast popularity among the Yunnan Hui people and also resented his role in protecting Hui Muslims. Ma was executed at the age of eighty-one (eighty-four by the Muslim calendar) and is regarded as a martyr by many Yunnanese Hui Muslims (Yao 2001, 66).



Figure 1. An 1883 edition of Ma Dexin’s *Tianfang mengyin ge* (Ode of the enlightenment of Arabia), a popular book studied by Muslim youth in China from the end of the Qing dynasty to the Republic. Each line of the poem is composed of seven Chinese characters.

Ma Dexin dedicated his whole life to the work of explaining and expounding Islamic doctrine, seeking cultural enlightenment. Of the four masters of Islamic research in the period of the late Ming dynasty and the Qing dynasty, he was the only one who devoted his whole life to religion and assumed the clerical post of akhund or imam. He wrote and translated more than thirty Islamic books in his lifetime (figure 1).⁴ In addition to his great contribution to Islamic thought and theoretical studies in the context of Chinese Islam, which he influenced profoundly through his many religious books, Ma Dexin is also celebrated for

promoting and reforming the madrasa education system in Yunnan in the latter part of the nineteenth century. According to Ma Lianyuan (1842–1903), a prominent Islamic scholar in Hui society in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Ma Dexin edited and wrote many simplified textbooks on various Islamic subjects with Chinese contextual characteristics, reflecting the reality of Islamic life in China in light of the demands of madrasa teaching. His work, which included commentaries on many difficult questions in the Arabic and Persian textbooks, was informed by his prodigious reading of original Islamic classics. The simplified Arabic textbooks Ma produced were easily understood and widely accepted by religious students of the various madrasas in China and elsewhere, making it possible to shorten the typical course of studies in the Quranic schools.

A summary of Ma Dexin's life suggests that his influence on the historical development of Chinese Islam was unparalleled:

1. No one else trained so many madrasa students in the late Qing dynasty: Ma Dexin's disciples included Ma Lianyuan, Ma Anli, Ma Kaike, and even two important leaders of the Hui uprising in Yunnan, Du Wenxiu and Ma Rulong (?–d. 1891).
2. He was honored by Chinese Muslims as the general mufti, the most authentic authority in the interpretation of Islamic law in China in the latter part of the nineteenth century (see figure 2).
3. He was regarded as the spiritual leader of the Muslim uprising in Yunnan by the majority of Hui people.
4. He was the general commander of the Hui Muslims' insurgency.
5. He was the first Chinese Muslim to be received by the Ottoman sultan, honored at a royal banquet, and invited to visit the Royal Palace and participate in royal events.
6. He was the first Chinese Muslim to translate the Arabic Quran into Chinese (twenty chapters, or five volumes, of the translation remained in print until the 1930s).
7. He was nominated by the Qing Empire as the temporary governor-general of Yunnan Province and Guizhou Province, since only he could maintain peace in the region.
8. He was executed by the imperial authorities after the failure of the Hui revolt in Yunnan, and therefore became known as a *shahid*, or martyr.

We turn now to consider why such an outstanding Muslim leader would write a book sharply critical of Shi'ism and its followers, the Sufi shaykhs in China in the mid-nineteenth century. Ma's work *Sidian yaohui* (The essential understanding of the four classics) was completed in 1858 and first printed in 1865 (figure 3). This book's purpose, as Muslim scholar Ma Zhaolong points out, was "to follow the Chinese rite, to cite the Chinese classics,

to translate the essentialness of humanity theories, and [to] guide people on the righteous road at the crucial time” ([1865] 1988, 13). Many Chinese Muslim scholars regard this book as one of the most important Islamic writings in China (Bai 1997, 182–184). Even today, it continues to be widely read and studied. Many Hui scholars and akhunds make the book a mandatory reference work in mosque-based madrasa education.



Figure 2 (left). *Tianfang liyuan*, a bilingual (Arabic and Chinese) book on the Islamic calendar written by Ma Dexin. Published in Hong Kong in 1912, the work mainly deals with the issue of the dates set by akhunds for the time of starting and breaking the Ramadan fast.

Figure 3. A page of Ma Dexin's *Sidian yaohui* (The essential understanding of the four classics) from the Chapter of the Six Tenets of the Original Faith.

Sidian yaohui is composed of four chapters, the last of which is titled “Zhengyi kaoshu” (正异考述, which literally means “examining and explaining orthodoxy and heresy”).⁵ This chapter analyzes the origin of the “heresy” within Islam and the reason this heresy became so widespread, and highlights the grave mistakes Ma Dexin saw in Shi’ite theory. My goal here is to explicitly analyze Ma’s motivation for assaulting Shi’ism and the shaykhs of Sufi orders in China, in order to ground this theological dispute within the actual social context of Islam in Yunnan, and to explain the relationship between the broader Islamic world and Muslim communities in China.

Rafida and the Sufi Shaykh in China Are Heresy

In “Zhengyi kaoshu,” Ma Dexin spares no effort in criticizing Shi’ism, as a heretical sect, and Sufi mysticism, led by the shaykhs as proxies of the Shi’a: “A state called Fars (Persia), with a territory of a hundred cities and ten thousand townships, all believe in Rafida [若废子], the heretic religion.⁶ Their works are mostly error and absurd fallacy; their narrations are likely faked” (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 76).

Why did Ma use so strong a word as “heresy” to label the Shi’a? In the Chinese social context, if one assails another as “heretical” and such an accusation gains support from the imperial authorities, it could result in a large-scale political persecution like that faced by the White Lotus sect in the Qing dynasty or Falun Gong today. However, from Ma Dexin’s point of view, such a charge against the Shi’a was logical. According to his orthodox stance, the core value of Islam is the belief in only one God. In his view, the Rafida sect worshipped the household of Ali, instead of worshipping Allah alone. Ma wrote that the Shi’a declared:

The older in our religion truly is the image of the Lord; it manifests by the respected in turn, this passes and that follows in succeeding, continually without being interrupted. It firstly showed in the body of Ali, next showed in the body of Hussein, his son, then in the body of his grandson, until the descendant in the eleventh generation. Afterward it showed in the body of Nizariyye, the most respected in our religion. (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 81)

According to Sunni Islam, to equate God with a person is to commit the cardinal crime of blasphemy (*shirk*), to fall into something akin to idolatry or polytheism. Ma logically assailed such a crime as heresy. Many Muslim scholars in the Islamic world who preceded and followed Ma, including in peripheral regions such as China, frequently repeated these charges against their theological opponents.

The second reason Ma accused the Rafida of heresy is that they did not follow the Hanafi *madhhab* (the Islamic school of jurisprudence). According to Ma,

The founder of our madhhab is Abu Hanifa. . . . He was an outstanding figure in holy Islam and there was no rival to his knowledge, wisdom, and reputation. All the judgments and interpretations of Islamic law should refer to this madhhab as the foundation that guides all thinking that follows. Even the talented and knowledgeable scholars in the world that follow cannot break the regulations set by this madhhab. If anyone should set up other rules and break the mores Hanafi has established, they have gone astray. (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 82)

Islamic scholars regard the Hanafi madhhab as the least restrictive school of jurisprudence among the four madhhabs, and this has given the Chinese Muslims greater

flexibility to adjust their own Islamic community to peacefully coexist within the mainstream Chinese cultural environment. Hence, the Hanafiyya provides the optimal space for Chinese Muslims' survival in a non-Islamic society. Ma regarded the Hanafiyya as the only righteous way for Chinese Muslims in China:

Mumin [people of Islamic faith] in Iran mostly follow the Shafi'i madhhab, while the Muslims in China mostly follow Hanafi madhhab, the superior orthodoxy. . . . Therefore, those that follow the Shafi'i school are Rafida, and heretics. Chinese Muslims trace the introduction of this heresy to the Fars, so they said: "Rafida, the Farsi people." (Ma Jizu 2003, 360)

The third reason Ma charged the Rafida with heresy is that he believed the sect opened the gate for others, specifically the Sufi shaykhs, to declare themselves sacred. This, for him, was again a betrayal of Islam. On this point, Ma ridiculed Sufi shaykhs as Rafida and spared nothing in his literal attack:

This stupid group says: "People understand that the Lord has neither body nor imagination, has neither direction nor location. Such opinion has fallen into emptiness, therefore, resembling the views of Daoists and Buddhists. Those who worship the Lord with such an attitude will gain nothing. Do they know that the Lord manifests the world with the image of a shaykh who guides [people] walking on the straight path? Thus, those who receive the guidance from a shaykh gain teaching from the Lord; whoever follows a shaykh actually follows the Lord; those who see a shaykh see the Lord. If one worships the Lord not going through the role of a shaykh, he will gain nothing and have nowhere to go." (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 80)

Although he used harsh words to attack Sufi shaykhs, however, Ma had been deeply influenced by Sufism when he was young, traveling to northwestern China to improve his Persian language knowledge and even studying Persian texts on Sufism. However, he changed his theological stance during his pilgrimage while studying in Cairo and Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire. I discuss this transition below.

Ma boldly posited that Sufi shaykhs were like the Rafida concerning personal deification, because they said: "If one sees a shaykh he sees the Lord, and a shaykh is the image of the Lord." And, "Someone says: one meets urgent despair, and turns to the Lord for help. However, Allah does not respond to him. Then he turns praying to a shaykh for aid, and the shaykh at once solves his need" (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 86). Ma replied firmly: "Ah, the Lord is not polluted by the false images, not mixed by air, nevertheless is the purest and the most subtle. However, they [the shaykhs] regard the Lord as incomplete and insufficient, and such a theory is all the same as Rafida, the heresy teaching" (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 80). He added: "Such arrogant speech originated from Zoroastrianism, which advocates that the sun

is the image of the Lord” (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 81).

In calling some shaykhs Rafida, Ma denounced them as the anthropomorphic impersonation of God: “A shaykh can turn a stone into gold by his finger’s touching, and he can strive for a few days in meditation to communicate with God. So he is extremely outstanding” (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 83). Ma further cited *The Commentaries of the Classic Qasid*,⁷ a Sufi work taught in China, as proof that a shaykh was indeed a heretical person: “A shaykh is just like a general commander; the world cannot live without a shaykh, but one generation just needs one shaykh, that’s enough. He works as the representative of the Prophet to lead people to return to the course of God” (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 84). In Ma’s view, the Sufi shaykh denies the role of the Prophet Muhammad as the messenger of God. This is a total break from orthodoxy and could not be tolerated by traditional Sunni Islam. He harshly exposed the supplanting of the Prophet Muhammad and the overstating of the importance of the shaykhs by some Sufi orders: “What the shaykh has taught is the internal part of religion; what the Prophet taught is the external part of religion. Thus, a shaykh is able to block the teaching of the Prophet, and he is even able to block the will of God. God may let some people die, but a shaykh can make them live” (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 84).

The fourth reason that Ma treated Rafida and some shaykhs as heretics is that they emphasized miracles performed by shaykhs, instead of practicing the basic principles of Islam (declaration of faith, prayer, fasting, alms payment, and pilgrimage): “Someone advocates abolishing the five pillars’ practices. He [a shaykh] lies to others that whatever he has done is the achievement of the one who knows his mind and follows his nature” (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 84). With these examples, Ma accused the shaykhs of being demons who had replaced the true with the false: “They looked like Muslims, but actually they are not. They are not even like Confucians, not like Buddhists, not like Daoists; they are the real *shaitan* [devil], the internal enemy in Islam” (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 84). Ma’s stand is clear here: Rafida and Sufi shaykhs are the same and are not true believers in Islam; they are even lower than traditional Chinese religious believers!

The Danger of the Sufi Shaykhs to the Course of Islam

Ma criticized the Sufi shaykhs for threatening to weaken the solidarity of Chinese Islam:

Today these men organize parties and divide the people into factions that use a rigorously maintain coherence. They are respected as the leaders of the parties, and they enlarge their organizations. Moreover, the classics composed by the Rafida sect have been introduced into China. But the scholars in our Islam have very shallow knowledge; they cannot distinguish the true from the false,

and rather set Rafida books⁸ as the authentic classics. So are the roots of heresy formulated by this kind of person. At present someone says that there is a shaykh who can perform miracles, can contain dragons and capture tigers, expel the devil and order the deity. Actually they are ignorant and lose sense, talk empty words, aim to confuse the stupid and the common. They practice a kind of witchcraft. Moreover, those men arrogantly say that they are shaykhs, able to do anything by their willing. They have the power to punish or reward people. If someone offends them, they can blaze him into ashes, so they not only kill him but also annul his *iman* [faith]. This is so strange that a shaykh has no heart for mercy, and will end a life out of his own selfish hatred. A Muslim loses *iman* by doing that, and makes people betray their faith. A shaykh like that is really a despot who destroys people, and he is worse than the devil. (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 86)

Hence, Ma denounced the shaykhs: “Oh, such kind of shaykh is the enemy of the country, the great danger of the world” ([1865] 1988, 86).

Ma further attacked the shaykhs by exposing what he saw as their hypocrisy: “They [these people who follow shaykh] hold that if man does not appeal to shaykhs but to Allah, that means he gives up the near support and turns to the remote helper. . . . They think: to ask God for help is not as good as asking the shaykh for help; this kind of behavior is truly the biggest mistake” ([1865] 1988, 87–88). Ma continued with these bitter words: “Today these shaykhs who teach Islam with beautiful slogans actually are the ones who cheat people” ([1865] 1988, 89). He also said: “If someone wants to understand the teaching of the Prophet, he just follows the imperative obligation of the religion. He does not need to search for help from the remote shaykh. The real shaykh would not teach religion with the motivation of gaining personal fame” ([1865] 1988, 91). Ma’s remarks reflect the determination of a paramount Chinese akhund in his great endeavor to erase any influence of Shi’ism and its representatives, the Sufi shaykhs, in China. This criticism, given by a prestigious imam in Yunnan against Shi’a and some shaykhs, exacerbated the tension between the majority Sunni Muslims and the minority Sufi suborders in Yunnanese Muslim society at the time.

The Social Context of Ma Dexin’s Opposition to Rafida and Sufi Shaykhs

One wonders if it is necessary for a great imam and Muslim leader to target Shi’ism and Sufi shaykhs as enemies of Islam in a country overwhelmed by idol worshippers and polytheism. To address this issue this section traces the historical relationship between Iranian Shi’a and some Sufi orders in China. Because Islam came to China through Persia along traditional travel routes (such as the Silk Road and the Spice Route), Persian Islam was bound to have a strong impact on Islam in China. The coming of the Sufi orders into China certainly bore the features of Iranian Shi’ism, not surprising given that the closest region

connecting China to the Islamic world from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries—Central Asia—was both Persianized and influenced by Sufi mysticism. Many Sufi orders or suborders in China trace their origins to Iran (see Wang 1999, 70–75).

Throughout their history, the Shi'a have suffered greatly due to persecution at the hands of ruling Arab-Islamic dynasties, even during the Seljuq dynasty (1037–1194) and later in the early period of the Ilkhan dynasty (1258–1353). Life was so difficult during these periods of political suppression that the *ulama* (religious scholars) of the Shi'a dissolved their communities and wandered in or fled to the edges or other areas of the empire to find refuge in Sufi orders (Mazzaoui 1972, 40). Therefore, scholars of Shi'a Islamic studies usually hold that Shi'ism is the outward or exoteric form of Sufism because of the close link between Shi'ism and certain Sufi mystical orders in the long history of Shi'a Islam.⁹ Although the Shi'ite gained legal status under Ghazan Khan Mahmud (1271–1304) of the Ilkhan dynasty, and Shi'a Islam was even declared the state religion during the Safavid dynasty (1502–1722), the Shi'a *ulama* maintained good relations with Sufism and kept the cloak of Sufi mysticism over their dogmatic teachings. The intermingling of the Shi'a with Sufism in this period of several centuries was thoroughly broken only by the extreme Shi'ite clerics from Kerbala: Baqir Wahid Bihbihani (1706–1791) and his son, 'Ali Bihbihani (n.d.), who exercised their great theological capacities to excommunicate (*takfir*) Sufis from the Shi'a ranks, formally restoring orthodox Shi'ism under the nineteenth-century rulers of the Qajar dynasty (1794–1925).

What was the connection between Persian Shi'a Sufism and Muslims in China from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century? According to Ma Tong (1981), the author of several books on Sufis in China, the Great Qubba Order is the largest suborder of the Qadariyya. This order adamantly insists that the doctrine of the Qadariyya originates in Shi'ism. The Great Qubba especially venerates Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and holds the position of Ali higher than that of the Prophet.

The heavy influence of Shi'ism on the Great Qubba may relate to the experiences of its founder, Shaykh Qi Jingyi (1656–1719), who was a disciple of Khwaj Abdu Allah, a Bagdad Sufi. Abdu Allah introduced Qadariyya teaching to China through Persia and Central Asia and initiated Qi Jingyi in 1674. However, before Qi Jingyi was accepted by Abdu Allah, he had been under the guidance of two Persian Sufis, Baba Gui and Baba Yu, both of whom were Shi'a and came from Iran. After the two Babas passed away, the followers of the Great Qubba established two *qubba* (tombs) as memorials for the Persian Sufis (Ma Tong 1981, 209). The other two suborders of the Qadariyya—Xiakou (which in Chinese means “Gorge

Pass”) Qubba and Chengjiao (“Town Corner”) Qubba—continued spreading their oral teachings, passed on from their shaykh: that the offspring of the Prophet in the nineteenth generation, Muhammad Hanafiyya, came to China from Persia in the twelfth century and led the people to dredge the river into the Gorge Pass. Therefore, the suborder took the name of the pass. Another shaykh, Faqra Hafiz (Baba Yu), came to China from Persia in around the sixteenth century. By performing miracles in the northwestern corner of Hezhou (today’s Linxia), he enabled the city wall to be easily rebuilt after having collapsed several times (Li, Qin, Feng, and Sha 1997, 691–692). Hence, according to the followers of these Qadariyya suborders, the abovementioned shaykhs were very possibly the Shi’a shaykhs who came to China teaching the Qadariyya doctrine in mosques in Hezhou. It seems apparent that there is a direct link between the Qadariyya in China and the Shi’a in Iran.¹⁰ The Great Qubba in particular reveres Ali as the religious chief of the Qadariyya and holds Ali up as “the most secret of God’s secrets, the most mystic of God’s mystics.” The order’s followers also think that “it is really true, not false, that the Qadariyya’s doctrine was originated from Shi’ism” (Ma Tong 1981, 357–358).

The historical sources above show that the influence of Shi’a Sufis grew among Chinese Muslims during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The forces of the Sufi orders eventually weakened the ranks of traditional (majority Sunni) Islam, which had historically been the dominating Islamic force in China. Because of the gradual spread of Sufism, followers of Islam in China further split and the ranks fell into various factions. Ma Dexin, as a prestigious akhund, was concerned about this and the future of Islamic life in China. Ma pointed out, with apprehension: “The coming out of the heresy is due to the religious scholar’s attitude that he thinks himself absolutely right or due to the arbitrariness of the practitioners. Hence, pseudoscience becomes popular, and the evil ways are followed; therefore, the straight path is blocked. After that the heresy causes dangerous consequences” (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 75). Further: “The teachers and the elderly in our Islam with shallow knowledge cannot resist such a great wave of heresy, and cannot analyze whether it is good or bad; therefore, the heresy now becomes rampant” (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 82). For weakening Islam in China by promoting this factionalization, Ma thoroughly scorned the Rafida and the shaykhs with the declaration: “The shaykhs cannot match with the prophets and the prophets cannot match with the Prophet Muhammad. We cannot compare the Prophet with Allah. That means we must follow the doctrine that God is the only one” (Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 92). In other words, Hui Muslims must follow the true teachings of Islam. To break the basic tenets of Islam was heresy. In Ma’s opinion, Chinese Islam could not tolerate

any influence of Shi'ism and its agents, the Sufi shaykhs. Islam in China could not risk the consequence of dividing traditional Sunni orthodoxy into many factions, and, ultimately, could not be forcibly assimilated into mainstream Chinese culture and society. Islam's basic principle of worshipping only one God and following the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad could not, Ma argued, be diluted and finally lost. Under Islamic teaching, the unity of Muslims and integration into the Muslim community should, rather, be treasured, and any factional activities should be opposed and stopped.

Islam in China after Ma Dexin

For many Chinese Muslim intellectuals today who advocate the unity of the *umma* (Muslim nation) of the Islamic world, it is an unforgiveable sin to exaggerate the difference between Sunni Islam and Shi'a Islam, or to incite a power struggle for leadership of the Islamic world between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, a century and a half ago Ma Dexin, the grand akhund, was furiously attacking the Shi'a and some Sufi shaykhs. Given Ma Dexin's preeminent position in Chinese Islam, such antagonism against the Shi'a and Sufi shaykhs may seem surprising today.

In my opinion, Ma's assault on the Shi'ite and some Sufi shaykhs reflects the tense competition that played out between the Sunni Ottoman Turkish Empire and the Shi'a Safavids, and later the Qajar Persian Empire. This rivalry consequently left its mark on the ranks of Chinese Muslims, reflecting a feature pointed out by the late professor Joseph Fletcher (1995): even in a peripheral, marginal region such as China, what happened regarding Islam was closely related to what was happening at the center of the Islamic world.

These events reflect the transitional stage of Islam in China: the domination of Persianized Islam (Qadim and Sufi orders) gradually lost its grip to the growing force of Arabic-Turkic Islam (the Wahhabi and Ikhwani movements, and the Ottoman Empire's reform movement).

Ma's opposition to Shi'ism and the Sufi shaykhs ended in a tragic massacre committed by his disciple Ma Rulong, who helped the Qing imperial army suppress the Jahriyya uprising in southern Yunnan in the 1870s. As a matter of fact, Akhund Ma's dispute with the Shi'a and Sufi shaykhs failed to maintain the unity of the Muslim ranks in China, instead further splintering the Chinese Muslim communities and subjecting them to internal fighting.

These events also reflect the strategy adopted by the Chinese Muslim elites: forming an alliance with the dominant power within Islam as well as with non-Muslim forces in

greater Chinese society. The purpose of such a strategy must have been to ensure the protection and survival of Islam and Muslims as a minority situated in a marginal position in a strong Confucian-dominated authoritarian society.

Linking with the Daily Lives of Muslims in China

There are certainly many perspectives concerning the impact of events on Islam in China, given the tense debate between Ma and the Sufi shaykhs. Here, I present four illustrative cases to illuminate the effects on Chinese Muslims' daily lives of their clerics' efforts to oppose "heresy" and maintain "orthodoxy."

1. The Debate over the Issue of Divorce

In the early 1950s, a Hui woman in Pingliang of Gansu requested a divorce from her husband, who had disappeared ten years earlier. This was a controversial matter at the time. The Hanafi school of jurisprudence rejects such a divorce, since a wife is required to wait for ninety years if her husband's fate is not clear and the wife does not know whether he died after joining a Muslim warlord's army. However, the Maliki *madhhab* permits such a divorce because it rules that, following a waiting period of four years, a wife can divorce her husband if he is judged to have died or disappeared, therefore allowing the widow to remarry. So Akhund Hu Xueliang (1918–1960), the son of Great Akhund Hu Songshan (1880–1955) in northwestern China, rendered a judgment in favor of a divorce for this Muslim woman based on the interpretation of the Islamic law by the Maliki madhhab. His judgment was also favored by the local Communist government, since the People's Republic of China emphasized women's rights. However, the other clerics disagreed with Akhund Hu Xueliang's judgment, viewing the Maliki madhhab as heretical in China. Moreover, they opposed the pro-Communist solution adopted by Akhund Hu. So, the debate over the divorce of the Hui woman caused a riot, and the local Communist authorities had to deploy the People's Liberation Army at the mosque to protect the life and safety of Akhund Hu (see Hu 2005¹¹). This example demonstrates the fact that many Chinese Muslim clerics treated madhhabs other than Hanafiyya as heresy, adopting a stance similar to that of Ma Dexin in the late nineteenth century.

2. Choosing the Strongest Religious Ally

Why did Ma Dexin so harshly criticize Shi'ism and some Sufi shaykhs who accepted Shi'a teaching? I think his hajj to Mecca and travels around the Sunni Islamic world played a

crucial role in changing his stance. Before Ma embarked on that journey in 1840, he was sympathetic to Sufi doctrine and Sufi shaykhs.¹² However, after Ma visited Istanbul and Cairo, the two great cities in the Sunni Islamic world, the ground shifted under him. In 1845, Ma was honored by Abdülmecid I (1823–1861) at a reception, and the Ottoman caliph and sultan gave Ma special permission for an official visit to the treasure house in the Istanbul Royal Palace (Ma Dexin [1861] 1988, 39). At that time the Ottoman Empire was competing intensely with the Qajar dynasty in Iran for regional hegemony in the Middle East. Clashes had broken out several times between these two Islamic powers. So the center and stronghold of Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire regarded Shi'a Iran as the archenemy from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century. While Ma traveled around the Sunni Islamic world, which was controlled primarily by the Ottoman Empire, he absorbed the enmity of official Sunni Islam toward Iranian Shi'ism. So the political position and official attitude of Ottoman Turkey influenced Ma Dexin, who thereafter regarded the Shi'a of Iran as responsible for causing a rift in the Islamic world, as well as segregating and factionalizing Islam in China.

3. Searching for Powerful Support

Another explanation for Ma's alliance with Ottoman Sunni Islam is his pragmatic approach. Muslims in China, particularly the clerics, often tried hard to maintain good relations with the most powerful forces in the Qing Empire, since they represented an ethnic and religious minority. They felt they could not afford to break ties with the ruling authorities or to offend the central government in Beijing if they hoped to avoid interference with their Islamic practices and lifestyle. Chinese Muslims, especially Muslim scholars and clerics, therefore usually chose to acquiesce to Confucianism and the central government, which strongly upheld the official ideological status of Confucianism. Nevertheless, the Chinese Muslims understandably sought support from the forces that they deemed strongest in their political and strategic assessments, given that they represented a militarily weak religious-ethnic minority that had suffered genocide in the past.

Translating this to the international arena within the Islamic world, such an alliance orientation would lead to a preference for the majority Sunni Islam represented by the Ottoman Empire over the minority Shi'a Islam represented by the Persian Empire. Even today, such a mentality continues to influence Chinese Muslims both politically and culturally: the Hui Muslims always ally with the strongest forces and have therefore affiliated themselves, for instance, with the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT) in the Republic

and the Communist Party in the People's Republic, always following guidelines they see in mainstream Chinese society, since they remain a minority and want to survive frequent political and social changes.¹³

4. The Dilemma Faced by Chinese Muslims over the Rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran

The accommodating attitude described above affects the daily lives and customs of Chinese Muslims. For example, in the course of my historical investigation of Hui Muslim society in Yunnan in 1994, I discovered that, during the late Qing dynasty and the era of the Republic of China, the Ottoman Empire (and later the Republic of Turkey) was the leading power in the Islamic world; consequently, Hui men adopted the fashion of wearing the red fez to cover their heads as a symbol of faith and purity in Islam. Similarly, although Muslims had the right to practice Islamic rituals in the People's Republic of China under Deng Xiaoping's Open Door and Reform Program, today's Hui Muslims—both clerics and ordinary males in Yunnan and other parts of China—have adopted the practice of wrapping long turbans around their heads for religious festivals and ceremonies, reflecting the most popular style of the Arabian Gulf countries. This is due in particular to Saudi Arabia's status as the most influential country in the Islamic world as a result of its great oil wealth and its being the Holy Land for hajj pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina. Many young Chinese Muslims today go to Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Islamic countries, rather than Iran, to study.

Additionally, more and more contemporary madrasas in China have replaced the traditional Islamic textbooks featuring *fars* (Persian) commentaries with new Arabic textbooks composed and printed in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, Malaysia, and other Sunni Islamic countries. Architecturally, traditional Chinese-style mosques have increasingly been demolished and replaced with Arabic-style mosques. The influence of the Wahhabi and Salafi movements, which originated in Saudi Arabia, is now widespread in Chinese Muslim communities and is increasingly erasing the foundation of traditional Qadim (Gedimu) Islam, which once contained many elements from Persia and Central Asia (see Wang 1996, Wang 1998, and Wang 2001). Perhaps the most noticeable indication of this trend is the tendency among some Chinese Muslim scholars to treat some pro-Shi'ism Sufi groups in China as dangerous to the unity and orthodoxy of Islam today.¹⁴

Understanding the historical debate and tension that arose between so-called "orthodox" and "heretical" forces helps to explain how violent factional clashes have echoed in the daily lives of Chinese Muslim communities since the time of Ma Dexin. For example,

we have seen the Ikhwani movement led by Ma Wanfu (1853–1934), which campaigned against Sufi orders by attacking and destroying *qubba* (tomb) complexes and denouncing them as heretical forces. Even today, many reform-minded Muslims in northwestern China treat the reverence Sufis have for their shaykhs and their tombs as heresy and want to disband these religious groups.¹⁵ Perhaps Ma Dexin was a pioneer of the Ikhwani movement, which was influenced by the Wahhabiyya in Saudi Arabia, where Chinese hajjis went on pilgrimage to Mecca; certainly Ma Dexin was strongly influenced by both the pan-Islamism of the Ottoman Turkish Empire and the Wahhabiyya of Saudi Arabia in the nineteenth century, and today many Hui hajjis in China follow in his footsteps.

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Notes

- 1 According to the official statistics, there are only twenty thousand Tajik Muslims in China who follow Ismail (or Seven Imam), plus a very small number of Uighurs and Huis who believe in Twelve Imam Shi’ism. I doubt the total number exceeds thirty thousand. So, the Shi’a in China could be less than 1 percent of the entire Muslim population.
- 2 Ma was one of the first Chinese Muslim visiting scholars to study at al-Azhar University in Cairo in the nineteenth century.
- 3 Zhang Shiqing (pen name Zhang Liangji) was the governor-general of Yunnan and Guizhou in the early period of the Muslim resurgence in Yunnan.
- 4 For more detailed information about Ma Dexin’s Islamic publications, please refer to Wang (2004, 30–31).
- 5 Here, the Chinese character is *yi* (异 or 异端), the “heretic way,” in contrast with *zheng* (正 or 正教), the “righteous religion.” Occasionally, Ma also used *xie* (邪) in his work to describe heresy.
- 6 *Rafida* is Arabic for traitor, deserter, or going astray; some Sunni orthodox scholars from the Arabic world in the nineteenth century used this term to refer to Shi’a, particularly the Twelve Imam of Shi’ism, calling them the Rafidite.
- 7 This book (Ch. *Gesuide jizhu* 格随德集注) probably is *Qasidat* (Poems), a classic Arabian poem collection with mystical Sufi content. It was studied by religious students in the madrasas in southern Yunnan in the middle of the Qing dynasty. The author and publication date are unknown. It seems likely that some Hui hajji brought the book into Yunnan on his journey home from the Islamic world (see Ma Dexin [1861] 1988, 84).

- 8 Here, I think Ma refers to the Persian Shi'a texts introduced by Shiraf, a Persian Shi'a scholar, who came to northwestern China from Khurashan in Iran during the early Qing dynasty. About forty-seven titles of the Persian texts written by Sharif were circulated among the Hui communities and denounced by Chinese Muslim scholars as heretical (see Zhao 1989, 13–14).
- 9 See “Sufi and Shi’ism,” <http://www.isfahan.org.uk/glossary/sufi/sufism2.html>, accessed May 12, 2012.
- 10 According to Chinese Islamic sources, “There is another suborder of the Qadariyya, Jiucaiping (“Terrace of Chives”) that puts great emphasis on the veneration of Ali, Fatima, and Hussain. In their rituals, believers praise these three by name, and even light incense, and chant the *du’a* [vocalized supplications] in their names. They call Fatima ‘Old Mother of *Haqq* (an Arabic term that means “Truth” and refers to Allah)’ (Li, Qin, Feng, and Sha 1997, 683).
- 11 Hu Xibo’s *Fuqin de zuihou suiyyue* [The last years in father’s life] has been circulated by Chinese Muslims since 2005, especially the part titled “Incident of the Upper Mosque,” which records this event. Akhund Hu Xueliang died during the 1960s, also in part a victim of his opponents’ hatred due to this debate concerning the establishment of an alternative Islamic legal school.
- 12 Ma Dexin talked about his meeting with a Muslim scholar named Isma’ila in Mecca as he was traveling on pilgrimage as a hajji. Ma asked him about Sufi Shaykhs’ teachings. Ustadh Isma’ila advised Ma that the Five Pillars of Islam were the foundation of the religion, and for a Muslim it was adequate to fulfill these imperative obligations. Having heard this speech from a Meccan scholar, Ma felt as if he had awakened from a dream. Later on, Ma read Ghazali’s work *Ihaya’I Urumi al-Din* (Revival of the roots of Islam) and after that he did not talk about Sufi mysticism anymore (see Ma Dexin [1865] 1988, 83–84).
- 13 In my fieldwork in Xueying Hui Village in a suburb of Beijing in 2002, I heard from an elderly Hui that this village excelled at performing the modern revolutionary Peking opera promoted by Madame Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao Zedong, in the region during the Cultural Revolution, far better than even the Han Chinese did (personal interview with a seventy-eight-year-old Hui in Xueying Hui Village, Beijing, Oct. 16, 2002).
- 14 Haosangke, “Visit Haimen Qubba in Wuxingping,” <http://www.2muslim.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=310277&extra=&page=>, accessed February 15, 2012.
- 15 There are many debates, often arguments, over this issue between the Ikhwani and the Salafiyya, on one side, and Sufi groups, on the other (see the Chinese Muslim website <http://www.2muslim.com/forum/php>). For example, tensions arose over one incident in which the armed forces demolished a mosque built by the Jahriyya group in Tongxin County in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region on December 30, 2011, and another in which the local government banned a Jahriyya group founded by Zhou Zequn in Xiji County of Ninxia on April 4, 2008 (see “Report on the Region’s Administration of Religious Affairs,” <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/26722398/>, accessed August 26, 2014).

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