CHAPTER 12

Some Thoughts on Sufi Groups in the Context of Islam in Northwest China

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Abstract

The Sufi groups are the major Islamic groups in the Northwest China. They are categorized into four major groups, namely, Khufi, Jahri, Qadiri, and Kubrawi Sufi orders (or menhuan in Chinese), with subcategories under these four orders. In the last three centuries, these Sufi orders and their masters were closely connected with Hui communities that were influenced by them politically, economically, socially and historically. In this chapter, the author analyzes such influences from five different perspectives, namely, Sufism, Sufism in the Hexi Corridor, secularization of Sufism, Sufis’ integral force in the Dungan Revolt (1862–1877 AD), and Sufi thought.

Keywords

Northwest China – Islam – Sufism

Hui, Dongshang, Salar, and Bonan Muslims followed the Qadim (or Gedimu) orders in their early days. However, due to the widespread dissemination of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, in the Qing Dynasty, they were converted, thus developing four major Sufi schools from the Gedimu order, namely, Khufiyya, Jahriyya, Qadiriyya, and Kubrawiyya (the four major menhuan in China) and additional subcategories under these four orders. In the past three centuries, these Sufi orders and masters were closely connected with Hui and other ethnic communities, which were influenced by these orders politically, economically, socially and historically. In recent years, as Islamic Studies has developed

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in terms of continuing research and teaching, many scholars researching on and teaching in the field of Islamic studies apply Marxist approaches to their research on Chinese Islam. Their results offer analyses of Sufi schools and orders and raise some important and meaningful interpretations that shed light on Chinese Islam with new insights.

1 Sufism

Sufism first appeared in the 8th or 9th century AD, combining both mysticism in theory and ascetic practices. Sufism urges a total disengagement from secularism and hedonism; and in terms of religion, Sufism disparages ritualism but emphasizes attendents’ faith and internal experiences. In the early days, Sufi masters were considered the wisest men. By the 12th Century, these masters were closely connected with the Arabic world, and their thoughts were widely accepted by the lower class in Arabic societies whose members thereafter organized various associations under the umbrella of Sufi mysticism. The widespread teaching of such mysticism is called “the way,” or dao (道). The Chinese transliteration of the Arabic original of of dao is “tuoligeti,” [tariqa] meaning the ways to purify one's heart and find union with Allah. Sufism looks down upon the ritualist practices of Islam but focuses upon personal practices of meditation and inner experience that make one's mind join Allah in a horizon of fusion. In other words, such meditation and inner knowing simplify many details of Islamic rituals practised by devotees of the Shia and Sunni sects. Several representative Chinese Sufi mottos say, “a brief moment of revelation through meditation is better than doing the tenets all one's life,” “the only masjid\(^1\) for you is in your heart,” or “Embrace your haqq.\(^2\)” These sayings emphasize meditational doctrines and rituals.

According to the doctrines of Sufism, a devotee of Sufism must be admitted by a Sufi master who guides the devotee to haqq, the true way—to approach Allah and to save the devotee's soul. In so doing, a devotee, being admitted as a pupil, follows the Sufi master throughout his life, obeying what the Sufi master has required as a role model. Al-Ghazali (1058–1111 AD) once elaborated the importance of this lifelong pupilage, saying that:

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1 Masjids (Maisizhi 麥斯只): meaning mosque, often used for the mosques provided for large congregations.

2 Haqq (Hange 罕格): another name of Allah, also referring to a person's faithfulness to religion.