

China Connections

Islam in China

Lena Scheen

Terrorism, war, refugees, niqab, Syria, ISIS or Daesh. It is hard to find a recent newspaper article on Islam that does not contain one of these words. But how often do we read about the twenty-five million Muslims living in China? Ever since the first Muslim traders arrived in the Chinese Empire over 1400 years ago, Muslims have played an important role in Chinese history. For this first issue of China Connections – a series on China's relation to the world and hosted by the **Asia Research Center (ARC-FD) at Fudan University** and the **Global Asia Center (CGA) at NYU Shanghai** – we invited four scholars to write about their research on Islam in China. Together they explore questions such as: Why did the Qianlong Emperor issue an imperial edict to conduct an empire-wide investigation of Hui Muslim communities in 1781? How did a small town in Yunnan Province become a center for Islamic learning? And how do its current residents deal with the haunting ghosts of 1600 Muslims killed in 1975? How does institutionalization play a role in the unification of the spatially dispersed and ethnically diverse Chinese Muslim communities? And how does a Chinese Muslim studying in Egypt experience the Arab Spring? It is through these stories of cultural exchange, conflict, and integration that we hope to provide a deeper, more layered understanding of Islam today.

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Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

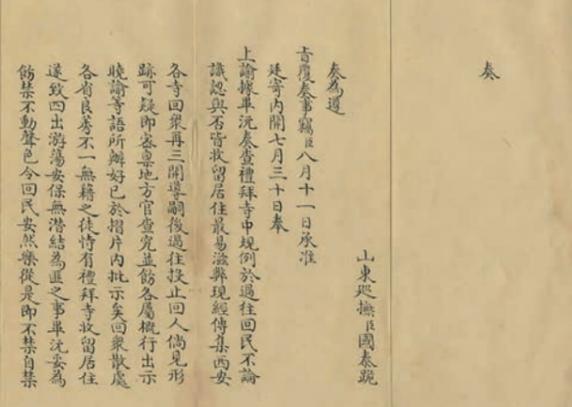
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Who were the Hui? The first empire-wide investigation of Hui communities in Qing China.

Meng WEI



ON 29 MAY 1781, the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-95) of China issued an imperial edict to conduct an empire-wide investigation of Hui communities. The order was in response to the 'FanHui' rebellion (also known as the 'Salar Rebellion') by the Hui minority in Gansu province. It was immediately passed down to the lowest levels of Qing government and detailed reports were sent to the governors or governor-generals of the eighteen provinces ('China proper') for investigation and then made known to the Emperor. The results of the investigation provided the Qing state with a renewed understanding of the Hui landscape of its empire and constituted the basis for future policymaking towards the Hui.

The 'FanHui' rebellion was inspired by Ma Mingxin (1719-81), a native of Gansu and a Sufi leader who had introduced the 'new teaching' to the region following his return from several years of study of Jahriya Sufi practices in Yemen. In a simplistic view, 'Fan' is a term often associated with non-Han populations neighboring 'China proper', while the term 'FanHui' in this context mainly refers to the Salars, a Turkic Muslim group in Gansu. The introduction of new elements into Islam triggered dissent and even violence among adherents of different and competing Islamic teachings. However, the prime cause of open conflict between the new-teaching 'FanHui' and the Qing state was the Qing state's inconsistent legal implementations and misconceptions over peoples classification during the transitional period when the regions that used to be 'Fan' were becoming an administratively part of 'China proper' as a result of the Qing westward expansion in the eighteenth century.

After the rebellion, the 'new teaching' was labeled as a 'heterodox teaching' (*xiejiao*) by the Qing state. On 29 June

1781, the Qianlong emperor issued another imperial edict to command that the investigation had to remain unalarming in order not to cause further disturbances. During the investigation, anyone found involved with the 'new teaching' would be seized immediately, interrogated strictly by provincial governors or governor-generals in person, and punished severely. Under this climate of suspicion, the investigators devised and deployed various strategies to access and probe into the Hui communities. For example, a Governor of Henan province selected local officials who, dressed in Muslim attire, had to go undercover among the Hui community. In another instance, a Governor-general of Sichuan brought in for interrogation as many as nineteen senior Hui residents from the provincial capital and its suburbs and four 'headmen' (*xiangbao*) selected by local officials and responsible for maintaining public safety as well as managing secular matters. Secret investigations into various Hui communities throughout the province were made afterwards to testify their testimonies.

The main goal of the edict was to find out whether there existed any positions or titles such as 'imam' (*zhangjiao*) and 'imam-superior' (*zong zhangjiao*) among the Hui communities, and, if so, to abolish them in an effort to prevent other rebellions by such religious leaders. The Qianlong emperor was probably relieved to find out these positions or titles were in fact not found in most of the provinces being surveyed. In addition, unlike the Hui in the 'Fan' regions, the Hui in 'China proper' turned out to be mostly peaceful, law-abiding, and not infected by the 'new teaching.'

This little-studied yet pivotal episode opens a rare window onto the Hui landscape in Qing China and offers a unique

Above left: "Salar man and woman in Hezhou, Gansu province." Source: *HuangQing zhigong tu* 皇清職貢圖 (Depictions of Tributaries of the August Qing), *juan 5*, pp. 6a-6b. The compilation of this nine-volume work was started in 1751 under the order of the Qianlong emperor. It contained analogous depictions of ethnic types within and without the Qing empire.

Above right: A memorial sent to the Qianlong emperor by the Provincial Governor of Shandong province on 13 October 1781. Source: Grand Council Archives, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

insight into the ways in which the Qing state perceived, identified, and managed the Hui. One striking feature found in the official reports is that, not distinguished from the Han, the Hui were all registered as 'commoners' (*minren* or *qimin*) into the *baojia* system, an instrument of social ordering implemented by the Qing.¹ However, although the Hui and the Han fell under the same legal category, by employing various investigative methods, Qing investigators still found their ways to single out and identify the Hui, evident by the number of Hui households and mosques they kept record of in their reports. In the very process of exhaustively searching for and recording the quantities of Hui households and mosques at every corner of 'China proper,' the Qing state envisioned the Hui communities in its various provinces as belonging to a same group, one that the state could keep monitoring ever since.

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References

- ¹ "Baojia was a system under which households were registered into nested decimal groupings of ten, one hundred, and so on for purposes of assigning collective responsibility in public security and other matters and for fixing personal responsibility for the group on a single 'headman' at each level of the hierarchy". Rowe, W.T. 2001. *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p.388.