

TRADITIONS OF MĀTURĪDISM AND ANTI-WAHHĀBISM IN CHINA: AN ACCOUNT OF THE YIHEWANI HARD-LINERS OF THE NORTHWEST

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The ‘hard-liners’ (*yingpai*) are a dynamic yet marginalized current found within the Yihewani (*ikhwān* or brothers), one of the five major sects among Sinophone Muslims, the other four being the Gedimu (*qadīm* or old), the Sufi ‘orders’ (Ar. *ṭuruq*, Ch. *menhuan*), the Xidaotang, and the Salafis.¹ The hard-liners first emerged as a rural-based sectarian movement reacting to the spread of globalized expressions of Islam in China’s Northwest (Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang) during the post-Maoist religious revival of the 1980s. Positioning themselves as guardians of an orthodox Māturīdī–Hanafi Islam, the hard-liners have repeatedly attracted public controversy over the past three decades due to their espousal of ‘excommunicatory’ (*takfir*) judgements of those perceived to threaten this orthodoxy, including the Salafis and the accommodationist Yihewani ‘soft-liners’ (*ruanpai*), whom they call, respectively, the

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¹ Sinophone Muslims encompass the Hui, Dongxiang, Salar and Bonan ethnicities.

Wahhābīs and Wahhābī-sympathizers.² Since mid-2019, this relatively small group has been subject to state repression due to their opposition to the appointment of a soft-liner ‘cleric’ (*ahong*) as head of the Dongguan Grand Mosque in Xining, Qinghai. This still ongoing development signals the possible disintegration of the hard-liners and the dispersal of their affiliates towards the underground.

Although a seemingly parochial and obscure group in the Islamic landscape of the Northwest, the hard-liners highlight several ideas relevant to the historical and contemporary study of Sinophone Islam. First, they showcase the continued importance of ‘creed’ (Ar. *‘aqīda*, Ch. *xinyang*) as an arena of contention among Sinophone Muslims and as a catalyst for the formation of sectarian identities. The creed in question—Māturīdism—has been an integral part of the intellectual and theological makeup of Islam in China for many centuries: the hard-liners illustrate that it remains so at present.³ There is a need, as this study will show, for scholars of Sinophone Islam to re-incorporate creed into their accounts, which had long been dominated, at least with respect to study of the Yihewani and Salafī groups, by an over-emphasis on divisions centred around ‘legal school’ (Ar. *madhhab*, Ch. *jiaofa xuepai*) identities, i.e., Ḥanafism, Ḥanbalism, and ‘non-affiliation’ (*wupai*).⁴ This

² Wahhābism is a contested term typically used to refer to the Ḥanbalī Salafī-tradition associated with the mid-eighteenth-century religious movement founded by Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703–92). Adherents to this tradition reject the name as derogatory and insulting, opting for such alternatives as Salafism or ‘Unitarianism’ (*ahl al-tawhīd*). The Sunni detractors of this tradition, such as the Yihewani hard-liners examined in this article, use the term Wahhābism as a way to stress its heretical and outlier character in relation to Sunni orthodoxy and orthopraxy. For an excellent discussion on the contested debate around this term, albeit in a Middle Eastern context, refer to: David Commins, ‘From Wahhabi to Salafi’ in Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer and Stephane Lacroix (eds.), *Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 151–66.

³ For a comprehensive overview of the Sunni schools of theology and their doctrinal positions, including that of Māturīdism, see Ma Zhanming and Ma Shengjian, ‘Xunnipai xuezhe weirao zhenzhu shuxing wenti de fenqi’, *Alabo shijie yanjiu*, 3 (May 2017): 48–59; For Yihewani and Salafī sources discussing the contemporary relevance of Māturīdism, see Hu Long, ‘Weisheme zhongguo muslim jintian rengan yao jianchi matulidi jiaoyi xuepai’, *Musliminzaixian* (8 May 2018), online: http://www.muslimwww.com/html/2018/zy_0508/33413.html (last accessed 7 January 2020); ‘Zhongguo sailaifeiyi de lishi yu xiankuang’, *Zhongsha wenhua jiaoliu zhongxin* (6 March 2017), online: <https://callingchinese.org/zh/da3wahcorner/articles/462/> (last accessed 3 February 2020).

⁴ For an informative discussion on the legal orientations and legalistic disputes found among Sinophone Muslim sects (or as the author opts to call them, teaching

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