

## A SILK ROAD BLUEPRINT: RELIGIOUS KINSHIP AND STATE CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NORTHWESTERN CHINESE BORDERLAND, 1912-1946

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**Keywords:** Northwest China, Infrastructure, Islam, Ma Family, Rail, Legitimacy Narratives, Borderlands, Architectural Regimes, Family Genealogies, Nation-building

### Introduction

How do architectural and infrastructural construction projects in northwestern China during and after the fall of the Qing dynasty reflect negotiated national and local modernization schemas along the historical Silk Road? Rather than seeing one state-legitimizing universalism (the Qing imperial ruling ideology) as having been replaced by another (the Communism), this paper shows how local military elites and distant state planners worked both for and against each other in a common pursuit: to securely connect the northwest with the rest of the nation militarily, economically, and politically. Building on a litany of previous studies that have approached this topic from changing intellectual regimes to shifting political alliances, this study specifically looks at architectural building plans – the monuments, mosques, mansions, tombs, parks, and rail lines that were constructed or were planned to be constructed by political elites along or in major cities. The architectural and infrastructural plans of early twentieth century northwestern China were envisioned over contested terrains and negotiated, deeply ideological spaces. This paper is the first academic endeavor to show readers how these architectural plans began, how they encompassed differing knowledge and political regimes and ideas of legitimacy, and how it was the precise non-uniformity of these architectural regimes and the peoples commissioning them that helped produce of a northwest incorporated into the Chinese nation state.

### Sources and Discussion

This new approach calls for new sources, in particular the architectural insights from a Chinese Muslim genealogy, the *Mashi zupu (The Genealogy of the Ma Clan)*, which offers unparalleled insights into early twentieth century architectural projects in northwestern China, specifically Gansu province. The genealogy was commissioned in 1946 by Ma Hongkui, the powerful Ningxia-based Muslim warlord, to be a lineage record of the entire web of Ma family generals in northwestern China. This genealogy has remarkably been unexplored and contains a gem of historical knowledge: the blueprints of the Ma family mansions in Linxia (southern Gansu), the layout of the Ma family cemeteries, the blueprints of planned Ma family memorial halls (Fig. 1), and the construction plans of a modern Ma family public memorial park, in Lanzhou (the capital of Gansu) (Fig. 2), complete with a flower garden and public toilets – all of which were constructed during the reign of the Ma families in northwestern China between the fall of the empire and the rise of the People's Republic. The Ma family, descending from a long line of eminent Muslim generals and military officers, had to invoke spectacle to appeal to two major constituencies. In Linxia, the genealogical homeland of the Ma family, the family constructed buildings and edifices to control and appeal to the powerful Sufi lineages and orders that had held pronounced power in the northwest for centuries. Yet in Lanzhou, the capital of the

province, the Ma warlords (who were largely in power in neighboring provinces) appealed to the needs of a more general public – including a distant state – with a massive memorial park with modern facilities. Equally noteworthy is fact that the genealogy reveals that the Ma family held power to the extent that they maintained a permanent grave site in Beijing for their family members who had died in service to the Qing. These projects exemplify the complicated visions of the Ma family as they sought to solidify their own power bases (religious, military and commercial empires along the historical Silk Road) within a wider nation building project.

The second major primary source will complement the first yet arises from a very different origin – *Minguo tielu yanxian jingji baogao (The Republic of China Rail Line Economic Report)* from 1935, which contains two extensive state inquiries into the feasibility of linking northwest China by a series of rail lines through Mongolia and Gansu. In spite of the fact that the rail lines were not completed until the founding of the People's Republic of China, the reports – each hundreds of pages long – detail the concerns (trade routes, agricultural output, military capacity) – that the planners considered in their outlining of the rail lines (Fig. 3). While state engineers drew up the plans, the reports had to be drafted in conversation with local power elites who helped complete the planning. In the case of the Gansu and Baotou (Mongolia) rail lines, that meant extensive cooperation with the local Muslim elites, who advocated rail lines that largely passed through towns along Muslim-dominated trade routes. Just like the Ma families, who had different audiences to appeal to through their building projects, the state had different constituents which they had to rely upon. The architectural story of this borderland shows that the development of the modern northwest can be traced through the interests of a myriad of groups, that in negotiating their own interests, contributed to the unification of the northwest with China.

## Conclusions

From these two primary documents we can trace how various architectural regimes of the post-imperial northwest were envisioned by constituents who ranged from related Muslim brethren in local position of power to state civil engineers. Rather than a product of careful vision and unified planning, the northwest was in part built by competing constituent groups – religious, political, and military elites – that worked both for and against each other in attempting to incorporate and control the region. In this sense, rather than being a backwards borderland, the very remoteness of the northwest and the autonomy and strength of its local ruling powers ironically gave it primary access to some of the newest architectural styles and infrastructure projects of modern China. Yet we cannot forget that many of these projects were not implemented exactly as they were envisioned: Republican rail lines were theorized but only finished by the Communists – who changed what had been previously planned – and many Ma family members fled into exile and hiding following the Civil War, with their mansions and parks only to be torn down. Today, the northwest is an integral part of the Chinese nation and will be for the foreseeable future, and in spite of the fact that the motivations and intentions (religious, economic, political, military) behind these building projects varied, they all contributed to an effort that eventually succeeded. There was no universalism – state or otherwise – in China's northwest at the dawn of the twentieth century. As a result, the Communists were able to exploit these myriad, incoherent narratives and provide their own while continuing their nation building project on the foundations that had been laid by others decades before.

Figures<sup>1</sup>

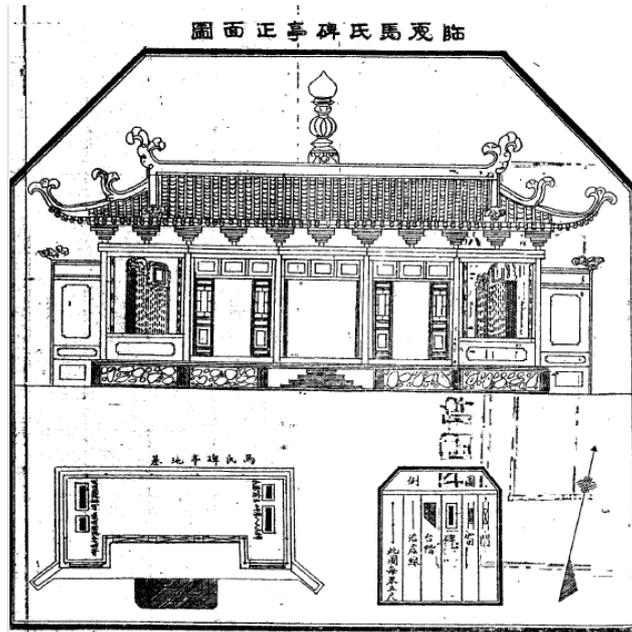


Figure One: Linxia Ma Family Memorial Pavilion Plan

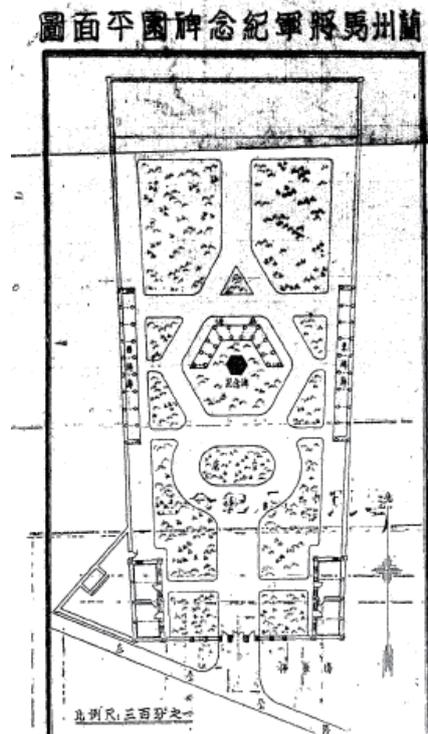


Figure Two: Lanzhou Ma General Memorial Park Plan

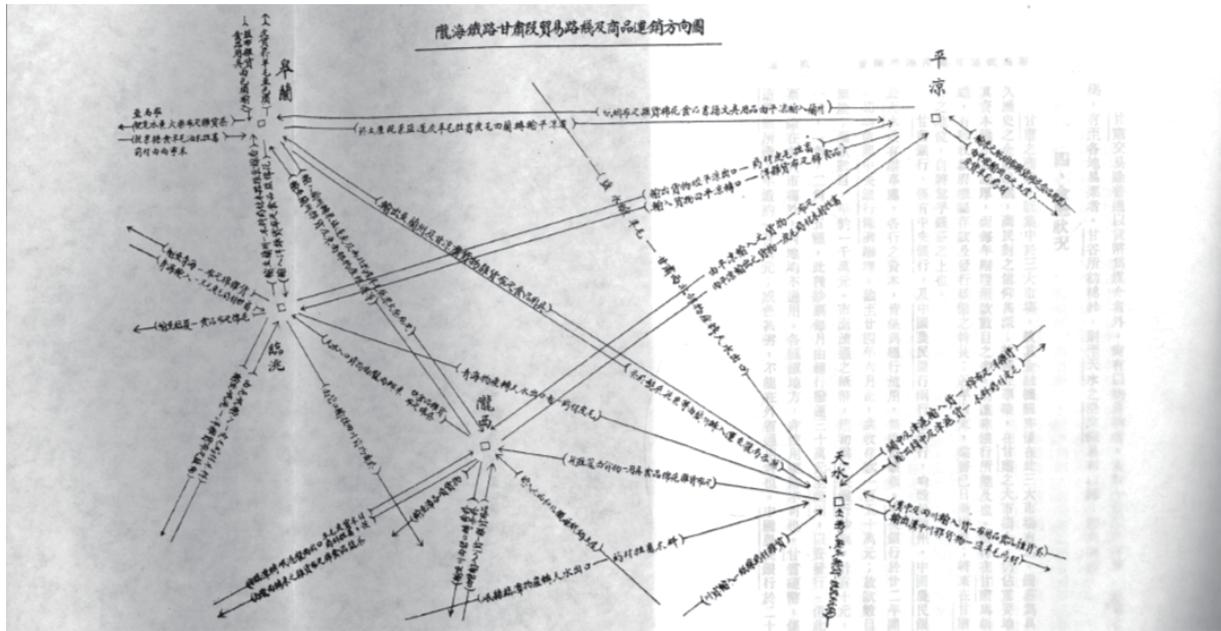


Figure Three: Map Showing the Trade Routes and Direction of Commodities in Gansu Province over the Region that the Longhai Railway Would be Built

**Notes**

1. The figures here are a selection. In the actual presentation and final paper, a wider array of building projects and graphs would be provided.

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