Barelvi brotherhood in Guangzhou : between preserving Pakistani “traditions” and creative adaptation

Bugnon, Pascale

Heritage and Religion in South Asia and its Diaspora : Frictions, Entanglements and Reconfigurations
29-30 June 2023

Paper Proposal:

Barelvi Brotherhood in Guangzhou: Between Preserving Pakistani "Traditions" and Creative Adaptation

Pascale Bugnon
Postdoctoral Fellow – HES-SO
Research Associate – University of Geneva

Abstract

The mausoleum of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas in Guangzhou (China) is presented as an important testimony to the history of the introduction of Islam in China, which legitimised its inscription as a cultural heritage site in 2013. However, this institutional recognition is not only due to a recent historiographical re-reading, but also to the presence of Muslim migrants. Indeed, while the local Muslim population visited the site very infrequently at the end of the 1990s, this was not the case for the migrant and foreign Muslim population, who have made a lasting contribution to the local religious life in Guangzhou and played a crucial role in the religious redefinition of the site. By focusing on one group in particular, the Pakistani migrants, associated with the Barelvi brotherhood, I will analyse their impact on the revival of Islam in general and Sufi Islam in particular. Indeed, as soon as they arrived in Guangzhou, they participated in (re)establishing the tomb of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas at the centre of their practices, developing Sufi networks, while adapting their practices to the local context.

Biography

Pascale Bugnon holds a PhD in Chinese Studies from the University of Geneva (Switzerland). After studying anthropology and sociology at the University of Neuchâtel, then Chinese and Russian studies at the University of Geneva, she specialised in the cultural heritage process of Muslim saints' tombs in China. Her first fieldwork on this topic was conducted in Xinjiang, where she analysed the political impact of cultural heritage on religious practice. For her dissertation, she shifted her geographical focus to southeastern China, conducting a multi-sited fieldwork in the cities of Guangzhou, Quanzhou and Yangzhou. Her work provides a multi-layered account of the dialogic transformations of Muslim heritage sites and the political uses of Muslim sainthood in China, through a processual approach, both at the local level (local authorities, religious leaders, etc.) and at the international level (especially through the Maritime Silk Road Initiative).

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage has become a crucial issue in Chinese political rhetoric since the early 1960s. Initially, the function of this discourse was essentially focused on the socialist and revolutionary ideology, but since the late 1980s, a paradigmatic shift has taken place in which the culture of ethnic minorities [少数民族] has been taken into account and used to promote narratives about harmony and unity of the Chinese society. This recent process led to the emergence of the protection of Muslim sites, including a specific category of buildings: "ancient tombs" [古墓葬]. In the midst of these tombs, various historical or legendary figures were given the status of national heroes through an institutionalised sanctification. Previously used as sites of "folk religion" and often labelled by the Chinese authorities as "illegal" [非法宗教] or "superstitious" [迷信] practices, these sites are being reclaimed through patrimonialisation, resulting in many structural and ideological changes at national and international levels. Indeed, the revaluation of this heritage, linked to the establishment of the "New Silk Roads", functions as a governance tool to validate and popularise historical narratives and to gain national and international legitimacy. In doing so, these developments have led to far-reaching transformations in places of worship and ritual practices, where the culturalising discourse downplays the religious aspects of these sites.

This paper examines the mausoleum of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas in Guangzhou (China), namely the tomb of the "ancient Islamic sage" [先贤古墓], which is presented as an important testimony to the history of the introduction of Islam in China, legitimising its inscription as a cultural heritage site in 2013. However, this institutional recognition is not only due to a recent historiographical re-reading, but also to the presence of Muslim (transnational) migrants. Indeed, while the local Muslim population visited the site very infrequently in the late 1990s, this was not the case for the migrant (internal to China) Muslim population and foreign Muslims, who have made a lasting contribution to the local religious life in Guangzhou and have played a crucial role in the religious redefinition of the site. By focusing on one group in particular, the Pakistani migrants, associated with the Barelvi brotherhood, I will analyse their impact on the revival of Islam in general and Sufi Islam in particular. Indeed, as soon as they arrived in Guangzhou, they participated in (re)establishing the tomb of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas at the centre of their practices, developing more or less important Sufi networks, while adapting their practices to the local context.

2. The Tomb of the Ancient Islamic Sage in Guangzhou

2.1 The arrival of Islam in China

According to data from the Chinese national census in 2000 (Min, 2012: 27), the country's Muslim population is approximately 20 million including ten Muslim nationalities, including Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Donxiang, Kirghiz, Salar, Tadjik, Uzbek, Boa'an, and Tatar, which are mainly concentrated in the northwest of the country (Xinjiang, Gansu, Ningxia, Henan and Qinghai provinces). Muslims appeared in China as early as the Tang Dynasty (618-907), entering the country by two main routes, overland through Central Asia on what became known as the Silk Road and by sea to south-eastern China. Some of these traders settled in the port cities of the south-east coast, particularly Guangzhou, Quanzhou and Changzhou, all of which became important commercial centres. According to tradition, the first Islamic mission to China arrived in 627 CE, led by the Prophet's uncle, who is said to have made his way from

the southern port of Guangzhou in the South to the Tang Dynasty court in Chang'an (Xi'an). According to another source, that of He Qiaoyuan's *Minshu* (c.1620), a historian during the Ming Dynasty, "there were four great sages among the disciples of Mohammed. During the Wude reign of the Tang dynasty (618-626), they came to China to spread the teaching. The first sage stayed in Guangzhou, the second in Yangzhou, and the third and fourth in Quanzhou, where they died and were buried". Accurate or not, it is true that the oldest Chinese Islamic communities, mosques, and cemeteries are located in China's southeastern port cities. Among a wide range of remaining Islamic sites, two are particularly important: the tomb of "Tomb of Ancient Islamic Sage" located in Guangzhou and the Islamic Tombs [伊斯兰教圣墓] in Quanzhou[1]. They are not only a rich source of important information about the self-perception of the Muslim community, but also an ideological support for developing a discourse on the beneficial contributions of Islam, as well as a tool for reshaping the direction of the religion. For these reasons, cultural heritage has recently been invested in by government policy.

2.2 Heritage-Making Background

Although the site has been listed as a cultural heritage site since 2013, the history of its protection is rather brief: It is said that the site was renovated several times between the 48th year of Chaolong (1779) and 1979 (Ma and Zhang, 2015: 18), but the inscriptions corresponding to the Tang and the Ming dynasties have not been found, only the inscriptions of the 20th year of Qing Jiaqing (1815), the 25th year of Daoguan (1849), and the 23rd year of the Republic of China (1934) have been recorded. In July 1962, the Guangdong provincial government announced that it was a provincial-level cultural relics protection unit (Cen, 2011: 108). During the Cultural Revolution, the ancient tombs in the site were destroyed to some extent, as were some of the inscriptions (Han and Yi, 2017: 179). It was not until 1985 that the People's Government of Guangdong Province re-approved the inclusion of the tomb of the Ancient Islamic Sage as a cultural relics protection unit of Guangdong Province (Ma and Zhang, 2015: 18). Between the 1980s and the end of the 1990s, the site was not at all the centre of the government's concerns. This is evidenced by the fact that in 1988 and 1998, the original site was even cut off from part of its land for the construction of the road to the North Gate and a car park to the South Gate. Moreover, it was not until 1999 that the site received religious recognition: the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau of the People's Government of Yuexiu District issued a "Registration certificate for Venues of religious activities" to the tomb of the ancient Islamic Savant (*Ibid*., 18). After the reform and opening up until 2000, there were still no arrangements for imams to carry out daily religious activities, and only scattered domestic and foreign Muslims came to pay their respects to the tomb (*ibid*., 18). Indeed, it was not until the 2000s that the site became a concern for the government, which invested in a broad process of heritage revaluation and urban development. First, in 2010, the provincial government approved the construction of a worship hall on the site in order to alleviate the lack of Muslim worship facilities in Guangzhou city. Second, the same institution approved the "Protection Plan of the Tomb of the Ancient Islamic Sage" (《广东省文物保护单位清真先贤古墓保护规划》) (hereinafter referred to as the "Protection Plan") in 2009 (Guangzhou Baiyun Cultural Relics Protection Engineering Co., Ltd., Guangzhou Han Rui heritage Design Research Center, 2009), which initiated a comprehensive heritage development of the site: In October 2012, the ancient tomb was recognised as an important part of Guangzhou's Maritime Silk Road historical site and it was listed by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage as a "Tentative List Chinese World Cultural Heritage" (UNESCO). Finally, in March 2013, the

[1] TheYangzhou site is particularly problematic as there is no evidence for the arrival of any of the Prophet's companions, see Bugnon, 2022.

tomb was announced as a key national cultural protection unit. These upgrading processes are therefore the result of concerns that have only recently arisen. External factors have forced the local authorities to take an interest in this site: first, the organisation of the Asian Games by the city of Guangzhou in 2010 and second, the importance of the Silk Road in political discourses have influenced the place of this site. However, in a more permanent and pragmatic way, migrations have also played a significant role in this revaluation of the site, replacing the figure of Sa'id ibn Abi Waqqas at the centre of a Sufi rhetoric and an important transnational network.

2.3 Migration and the (re)emergence of local Islam

Since the 1990s, with the deepening of country's policy of Reform and Opening-Up and the establishment of the commercial position of (especially) China's south-east coastal regions, a large number of domestic and foreign Muslims have come to the south-east coast to engage in commercial activities. In the early 1980s, there were only 6,700 Muslims in Guangdong. By 2000, there were 28,000[2], bringing the total number of Muslims in Guangdong province to 300,000, according to incomplete statistics (Wang, 2017)[3]. These migrants are mainly Hui Muslims from northwestern China (Xiang and Ma, 2019: 59), who have been sent to the big cities from Qinghai province to escape the droughts and find work since 1999, when the local government decided to convert agricultural land into forest (Xiang and Ma, 2019: 59). This population is joined by foreign Muslims from a variety of backgrounds. Despite a considerable lack of data and research on the subject, it is possible, in a kind of partial and summary typology, to divide the foreign Muslims in Guangzhou into two large groups that are particularly relevant to the study of this site: the "Africans" and the Pakistanis[4]. Based on the pioneering work of Mathews Gordon (2017), the "African Muslims" emerged in Guangzhou in the late 1990s and early 2000s, especially with the development of the "Guangzhou Fair" and China's ratification of the World Trade Organisation in 2001. Although it is very difficult to estimate their exact number[5], their presence and impact on the revival of Islam in general and Sufi Islam in particular is quite remarkable. As soon as they arrived in Guangzhou, they participated in the (re)establishment of the tomb as the centre of their practices, came in large numbers to meditate there, and established Sufi networks, although essentially clandestine and difficult to penetrate[6].

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[2] According to statistics cited in the works of Chinese scholars, the number of local Muslims increased from 2145 in 1932 to 6166 in 1990. These statistics also give the figures for 1964: 4453 and 1982: 5488. See Li, 1996 : 149 ; Ma, 1996 : 55 ; Chen 2011 : 137.

[3] This is a common phenomenon in coastal areas. For example, Shenzhen, which originally had almost no Muslim population, had 50,000 Muslims in 2009. Shanghai had 100,000 in 2009, mostly from the northwestern provinces.

[4] Groups to which "Middle Easterners", "Central Asians", "Caucasians", "Asians", etc. should be added. There is no research on these migrant groups in China, and even less so in Guangzhou. The exception that proves the rule is the work of Syed Ahmad Ali Shah, 2019, *Ba Tie Observed: A Study of Pakistanis' Transnational Life in Southeastern China*, PhD Thesis, Shaanxi Normal University, China, which focuses on two Pakistani communities in Guangzhou and Keqiao; and the work of Gordon Mathews (with Linessa Dan Lin and Yang Yang), 2017, *The World of Guangzhou. Africans and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, which discusses "Africans" in Guangzhou.

[5] The figures quoted in the above research would be between ten and twenty thousand people, while other works put forward data between two and three hundred thousand. The two hundred thousand figure, for example, is supported by Lan Shanshan, 2015, "State Regulation of Undocumented African Migrants in China: A Multi-Scalar Analysis," in: *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 50, no. 3, p. 295.

[6] Among the many *tariqa* present in Guangzhou, the Tijaniyya appears to be very well established. According to some practitioners affiliated to this brotherhood, there are as many as 100,000 members in China, but the figures are not verifiable. My Senegalese interlocutors, all members of this brotherhood, told me that they organise rituals in private homes. I tried to attend several times, but all my attempts were in vain: each time I was promised an invitation to the next meeting, but inevitably something unexpected happened that prevented me from attending.

The second group is made up of the Pakistanis, whom the anthropologist Ahmed Ali Syed studied for his doctorate. Arriving after the period of Reform and Opening up in the 1980s, they settled in Guangzhou to open small businesses or to engage in the import-export of all kinds of cheap goods, and today they make up one of the largest communities of foreigners in this cosmopolitan city (Syed, 2019: V). Among the various places of worship that exist in Guangzhou, the vast majority of Pakistanis attend the Mosque of the Ancient Sage (Syed, 2019: 81), as the mausoleum is considered to be a source of *baraka* (Syed, 2019: 159). For Pakistani communities, and more broadly for South Asian communities, the spread of Islam is attributed to Sa'id ibn Abi Waqqas, which explains why his tomb is particularly revered. Of the many Pakistani Muslims who visit it, a large proportion are followers of the Barelvi school[7], in which the veneration of saints is a central part of ritual. The tomb of Sa'id ibn Abi Waqqas is therefore a convergence point for this group, allowing them to reconstruct their rituals in Guangzhou. These various migratory contributions are one of the direct causes of the (re)emergence of Islam in southeast China, especially in Guangzhou (Xiang and Ma, 2019: 53). However, this re-emergence is taking place within a restrictive framework in which the expression of religion is extremely limited.

2.4 Negotiating the Place of Islam

As in previous centuries, Islam has had to adapt to different forms of government, forcing Muslims to downplay the political implications of their religion. "Its ongoing adaptation, first to the norms of imperial Chinese society, and now to the restrictions of Communist China, has required Muslims to actively assert this identity – to "apoliticise" Islam" (Frankel, 2008: 433). While affirming its apolitical nature, they are constantly involved in politics. One concrete aspect of this implication is the role of religious associations in China. In the case of Islam, Muslims are led by the National Islamic Association, which is divided into several subgroups at the provincial and municipal levels. The main tasks of these Islamic groups are to: conduct Islam activities; organise Islamic education to cultivate Islamic teachers and personnel; explore and systemise the historical and cultural heritage of Islam; conduct Islamic academic cultural studies, and compile and publish classical works, books, and journals; organise ethnic Muslims across the country to make the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca; and engage in friendly exchanges with Muslims and the Islamic organisations of various countries on behalf of Chinese Muslims (Min, 2012: 30). In this configuration, the Islamic Association of Guangzhou had to take a stand on the place of Islam at the local level and promote the Sinisation of religion. Indeed, since 2001, the National Islamic Association has set up a committee to ensure that scripture is interpreted in a way that serves the interests of the Chinese government and the Communist Party. An extensive political programme has been put in place to propose an understanding of Islam with Chinese characteristics, allowing to overcome the theological problems inherent in the differences between the various religious schools, which often lead to riots and clashes (Ma, 2011). Thus, Muslims are urged to follow the "Middle Path" [中道], a path adapted to socialism and opposed to extreme thoughts (Wang, 2017). Since 2015, the Chinese authorities have called for the building of a nation that embraces the historical, cultural, and linguistic diversity of its population, in which all people, regardless of ethnicity and/or religion, identify with the state (Ma Rong, 2017). Indeed, campaigns targeting specific regions, religious buildings, and activities have targeted Muslim communities through the "Sinicisation of Islam" plan (Islamic

[7] The Barelvi order was founded by Ahmed Raza Khan (1856-1921) in India, in Uttar Pradesh. The Barelvi regularly visit Sufi shrines. This trend contrasts with the approach of the Deobandi, who consider visiting the tombs and mausoleums of saints or *pirs* (pious men) to be *bidaah*, i.e. an innovation, and therefore contrary to the religious principles of Islam: *ibid*., p. 95.

Association of China, 2019) , which focuses on spreading Chinese nationalism within Islamic practices.

3. Downplaying Religion, Exalting Tradition

The recognition of this cultural heritage site redefines the place of religion is redefined as the very function of these places of piety. Indeed, at the local level, many cadres and officials have downplayed the religious aspects of this mausoleum to emphasise its secular appeal. This is partly because religion is a sensitive issue in China, so cadres are wary of being accused of promoting superstition. It is also because cadres and local intellectuals believe that using these sites as cultural capital would accelerate the growth of tourism (overseas pilgrims, international visitors, Chinese tourists and foreign investors) and promote economic development. This process of transforming the saint from a religious icon to a cultural symbol is also largely due to local realities and thus contributes to the transformation of the normative framework of the religious device and intercommunal symbolic representations. In order to manage the sensitivities of different Muslim religious groups and national religious guidelines, the Islamic Association of Guangzhou presents this site as a memorial and "traditional" *haut-lieu*. The term "tradition" [传统] is thus invested in patrimonial and religious rhetoric, although in practice, various practices of saint worship are carried out. The tradition has been discursively dissociated from "religion", and transformed into a "public sacred" tradition, strongly associated with the nation. This has provided the state with an opportunity to sanction and control certain ritual expressions, while condemning those that are considered 'superstitious' because they involve potentially subversive practices that are not deemed appropriate to the heritage of a modern, secular state. In other words, heritagisation can serve to provide ostensibly secular authorities with a strategy for controlling and pacifying popular devotional practices by transforming them into state-sanctioned standardised performances.

The emphasis on "tradition" also serves as a mantra for local institutions, urging believers to "become good Muslims" [争做优秀穆斯林] and "help make Guangzhou a harmonious and stable city, an important national city, to realise the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" [8].

Figure 1 : Slogan at the site of the Tomb of the Ancient Sage

Source: Pascale Bugnon

[8] 为广州伊斯兰教领域及和谐稳定，广州建设重要国家中心城市，实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦贡献力量. See also Wang, 2017.

In this process of religious standardisation, some of the activities presented, studied and exhorted in the speeches and various publications on Islam in Guangzhou give prominent place to official celebrations, i.e. those recognised and authorised by the authorities[9]. There is no mention of the tomb as a Sufi site in any municipal text or official speech by religious personnel. In fact, the figure of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas is presented as the propagator of Islam in China, who is said to have built the first mosque in Guangzhou. As a pioneer in the development of Islam in China (Bao, 2014: 52) and "friendly exchanges between Muslim countries and China", he made "indelible contributions" [不可磨灭的巨大 贡献] (Guangzhou Islamic Association, 2018a: 43), embodying the prosperity of cultural and commercial exchanges in Guangzhou along the Maritime Silk Roads (Han and Yi, 2017: 166). Like all similar sacred sites, the tomb is meant to be the material expression of a religious origin: before it there was nothing, after it a flourishing religion whose tomb personifies the introduction of Islam to China. The debt to him is therefore immense: this founding memory, embodied in the building, places the site in the hagiography of the sage and gives it its quality of "place of memory" (Nora, 1997). For this reason, the official discourse typically downplays the "religious" character of the site and redefines it strictly. On the website of the Islamic Association of Guangzhou, a "Notice on Visiting Tombs" [游坟须知] (Guangzhou Islamic Association, 2018b) explains the position of the institution and defines what is allowed and what is not. According to this document, worshipping graves is allowed, though not necessary, as a form of commemorating the dead and reminding the living that life is a gift[10]. However, certain actions are forbidden, and the notice lists the prohibitions: "do not ask the dead to intercede for you or for those around you" [11]; "do not kneel, prostrate, bow, and even less, do not prostrate before the dead, this gesture is reserved for the Creator" [12]; "forbid all superstitions such as burning paper money, lighting firecrackers or candles" [13]; "do not put food or drink in the grave" [14], "do not burn incense" [15], "do not cry, complain or tell trivial stories, it is unnecessary and harmful to the deceased" [16].

4. Accommodations

However, despite this clear positioning on the part of the local association, very heterogeneous practices and rituals emerge here and there. Inside the tomb, the practices reflect both the different sects and the origins of the believers: while some meditate alone, read the Koran or make a *du'a* [都阿][17], others express their devotion in more exalted ways: crying hot tears, lamenting for long minutes, facing the tomb, kissing it, lifting the cloth covering it to come into direct contact with the granite of the tomb, resting their foreheads on it or rubbing various small objects on it to charge it with baraka. Between these two extremes, others make the circumambulation, leaving various offerings such as perfumes, pieces of white cloth (for

[9] The official ceremonies, besides the five daily prayers, are Eid al-Adha [古尔邦节], Mawlid [圣纪节] and Eid al-Fitr [开斋节]..

[10] 游坟是伊斯兰教允许的，是纪念亡人的一种形式，是提醒在世的人领悟人生、警惕死亡.

[11] 切勿祈求亡人保佑自己及家人.

[12] 不得向亡人下跪、鞠躬、作揖，更不得向亡人叩头，因为这些只可以向独一的造物主.

[13] 禁止一切迷信活动，如烧纸、放鞭炮、点腊烛等.

[14] 严禁在坟上摆放任何食物或饮品.

[15] 坟上不可点香.

[16] 不能嚎啕大哭，数落抱怨，叙述尘事，这对亡人无益而有害 : *ibid*.

[17] Special invocation, palm facing the sky, followed by a gesture with the hands from the top to the bottom of the head to signify receiving the grace of God.

the less wealthy) or richly embroidered clothes that cover all or part of the tomb, or generous donations. Others discreetly bring back objects that have come into contact with the tomb (beads attached to cloth, decorative objects, etc.), which are also charged with baraka and represent a souvenir of this pilgrimage[18]. In short, between individual blessings, regular visits, personal supplications, sectarian practices or simple curiosity, the tomb is the scene of intense worship activity, which is becoming increasingly well known. But this chaotic effervescence is only apparent. Beneath the veneer of diversity of practice, there are in fact organized, affiliated groups that go far beyond illusory confusion.

An assiduous presence at the site allowed me to observe another religious aspect that was completely absent from the official semantic register. After a few weeks of fieldwork in and around the mausoleum, I noticed that some worshippers were organising themselves after the *salat* to carry out other rituals, very different from those usually associated with the *gedimu* current. At first I thought that these informal gatherings must be very ad hoc and in no way reflected a parallel organisation. Gradually I realised that these groupings were very well established and regular, and that there were two specific groups. The first was made up of members of the *Huasi* [19] movement, a sub-branch of the Khufiyya Brotherhood [虎夫耶 or 虎非耶]. Every Friday, the members of this brotherhood organised more or less important *ermaili* [尔麦里] [20] and other specific ceremonies, including the recitation of the *dhikr*[21], punctuated by rhythmic movements, sometimes with musical accompaniment, the reading of suras and sacred texts, the burning of incense, and offerings. Usually, these sessions were held with a small number of regulars, in favourable locations: if possible, they were held inside the tomb itself, but if the tomb was too crowded or the celebration attracted a large number of participants, they were held outside the tomb, either behind it or on a nearby esplanade.

The second group is the Barelvi, who also organised rituals specific to their community every Friday after the ritual prayer. Led by Shahid Naqshbandi, a Pakistani trader and local Barelvi leader, followers of this sect gathered in the mosque of the Tomb of the Ancient Sage to pray and sing praises to the Prophet. The group has its own Facebook page where it broadcasts its activities live (Syed, 2019: 103). As foreigners, the group's followers cannot preach or organise religious life on Chinese soil[22]. However, their numbers and well-structured organization mean that they play an active role in the functioning of local religious life, and not just at the ritual level: during the month of Ramadan, members of this movement helped the

[18] *Kiswa* offerings are periodically removed from the tomb by the guardian and redistributed to the faithful who wish to take one home.

[19] The *Huasi* Brotherhood [华寺, Flower Mosque] was founded in 1734 by Ma Laichi (1673-1753) in Linxia Prefecture (Gansu Province).

[20] '*Amal* in Arabic. Refers (for Sufis in northwestern China) to a donation made to the head of a Sufi order, or to a feast held in honour of the anniversary of the death or birth of the Holy Founder or his successors.

[21] The *dhikr* is an ejaculatory prayer which, accompanied by precise physical techniques, codified by the spiritual master, and by the mobilization of all the bodily energy, is repeated incessantly in remembrance of the name of God, see Anawati and Gardet, 1961: 187-258; Penard, 2003: 119.

[22] National Religious Affairs Administration [*Guojia zongjiao shiwuju* 国家宗教事务局], 2007, "Measures for the Administration of Collective Religious Activities of Foreigners in the Territory of the People's Republic of China" [中华人民共和国境内外国人集体宗教活动管理办法], in : *National Religious Affairs Administration* [en ligne], URL : http://www.sara.gov.cn/flfg/316457.jhtml, accessed March 22, 2021. See also Article 52 of the « Ordinance on the Management of Religious Affairs of Guangzhou Municipality », 2000: 23: « Foreigners in this city may not found religious organizations, establish religious working bodies, set up venues for religious activities, or set up and operate religious schools and seminaries; they may not proselytize believers among Chinese citizens, appoint religious teachers and staff, recruit religious students for studies abroad without authorization, nor distribute religious publications or conduct other missionary activities ».

local association to distribute meals during the *iftar*[23]. Such is the group'she involvement in the religious life of the city that that the accession of the current president of the Guangzhou Islamic Association, Imam Wang Wenjie, was undoubtedly motivated by the fact that he had studied in Pakistan[24].

4.1 The Case of Festival *Darenji*

These constant tensions and adjustments between religious practices and "local traditions" are a constant in the daily practice of the Islamic Association of Guangzhou. They culminate can be seen in the celebration of the death of Sa'id ibn Abi Waqqas, the Darenji Festival [大人忌] [25], which the local Islamic Association organises every year on 27 November in the Muslim calendar[26]. During this ceremony, the semantic issues surrounding "tradition" and its various variations come to the fore, highlighting the ambiguity of the groups at play on this site. As I will show, the registration of this ceremony, which is officially recognised at the local level, provides an opportunity for external actors to invest in this space as well. The analysis of the official ceremony and of these substitutes allows us to identify the stakes and the processes of heritage appropriation in action, where the instrumentalisation of an official event by the community is revealed. However, the different forms of worship are not mutually exclusive: while everyone performs their rituals independently according to very specific codes, certain practices interpenetrate from time to time, giving rise to a mobile religious landscape.

Every year, the Islamic Association of Guangzhou organises a commemoration of the death of Sa'id ibn Abi Waqqas at the site of the Mosque of the Ancient Sage. This ceremony is billed as a "local festival" [地方性的节日] commemorating the first historical figure who "brought the seeds of Islam to China" [把伊斯兰这颗种子带到中国] (Bao, 2008: 100; 2014: 130 ; Wei, 2012: 2). The idea is to pay homage to a central figure, while at the same time ascribing to him the attributes of an "ancestor" with impeccable moral values, in response to current discourses in China. The Hui from the northwest, for their part, organise their own ritual, after each participant has paid their contribution to the *menhuan* treasury in the form of *hadiyya* [海底耶], the legalised "gifts".

4.2 The Barevli Way of Performing the Darenji Ritual

At the same time, the group of Pakistanis belonging to the Barelvi brotherhood also organised their own ritual to commemorate the anniversary of the saint's death, with very specific aesthetic and religious codes, commonly called '*urs*. In Pakistan, these celebrations give rise to spectacular pilgrimages and ceremonies at the sanctuaries (tombs or former hermitages) of the *pir*[27], which are very numerous throughout the country (Matringe, 2002). In preparation for this celebration, two Pakistanis belonging to this movement had spent the previous day decorating the tomb of Sa'id ibn Abi Waqqas and its surroundings: the stone path

[23] The meals were provided by the caterers, many of whom were Pakistani.

[24] These "rumours" were told to me during my fieldwork, particularly by my Pakistani and Indian interlocutors, who emphasised the fact that this Imam did not speak Urdu, one of the official languages of Pakistan.

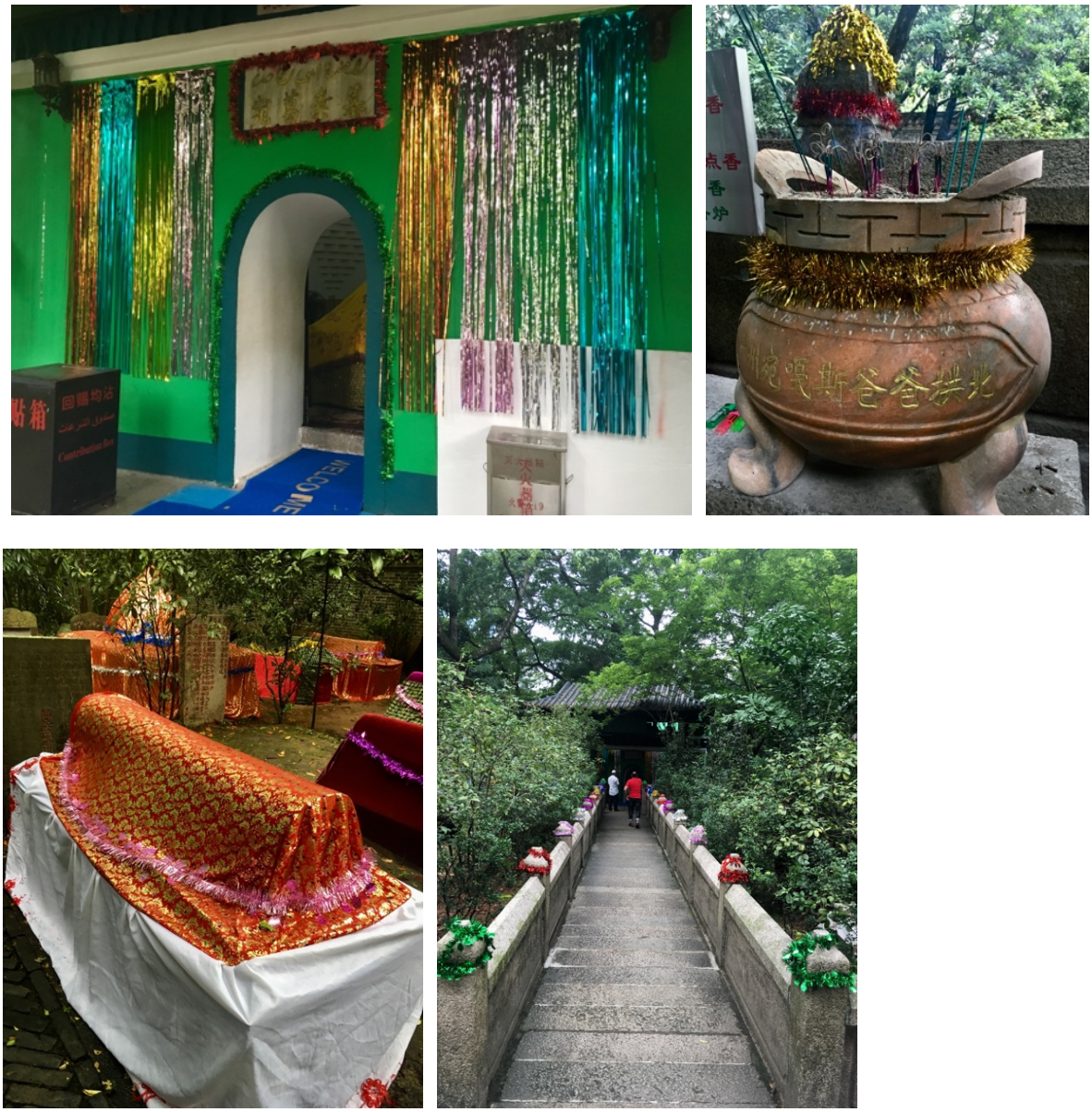
[25] Given that Sa'id ibn Abi Waqqas is said to have met the Emperor Taizong, he was given the title of *daren* (大人) as a sign of respect. The commemoration of his death is therefore called *Darenji* (Wei, 2012: 2).

[26] In 2018, the commemoration took place on August 12.

[27] In the Sufism of the Indian subcontinent, this term refers to the spiritual master who guides the disciples on the path.

leading to it, the tombs surrounding the main mausoleum, the incense pots and even the entrance to the tomb were covered with fringed curtains in metallic colours and shimmering garlands.

Figure 2: The mausoleum and its surroundings decorated by the Barelvi Order



Source: Pascale Bugnon

According to the practices of this brotherhood, the commemoration of the saint is materialised through the performance of *qawwali*, a musical genre popular in India and Pakistan that expresses Sufi Islamic devotion through the declamation of poems and songs with the aim of generating emotions, mysticism that can lead to ecstasy (Matringe, 2002: 32). However, in the Cantonese context and the reformulation of ritual codes, the performance is revisited, less "spectacular" but just as intense. Inside the tomb itself, the protagonists had brought an amplifier and a microphone, and each took turns singing and reciting poems in Urdu. According to the anthropologist Ahmad Ali Syed, these songs and poems are essentially praises to God and the Prophet, mystical evocations that can induce an ecstatic state (*hâl*) that is interpreted as an encounter (*wajd*) with Allah, a fusion with him.

At around 4pm, while the northwestern Hui and Barelvi brotherhoods were still holding their own rituals, the official ceremony inside the mosque was about to begin. The place was strangely empty, with only a few regulars already seated, waiting for the ceremony to begin. It began with a sermon by the imam, identical to the one given earlier to the northwestern Hui : it emphasised the values conveyed by the figure of Waqqas, the building and maintening of a "harmonious society" and the importance of the formula "*aiguo*, *aijiao*" [love your country, love your religion, 爱国爱教]. After these introductory words, the city's nine imams began the religious ceremony with a *zansheng* (praise to the Prophet). The mosque gradually filled up as the rituals of the Pakistanis and the people from the northwest came to an end.

After the official prayer, the Chief Imam announced that the group of Pakistanis would perform a special ritual to commemorate the holy figure by changing the cloth covering Waqqas' tomb. This "special tradition" [特色的传统][28] is a ritual from the Indian subcontinent, better known as *chadar poshi*. "According to Mufti Fazeel, this makes the grave more luxurious and is an act of respect and honour for the Sufi" (Syed, 2019: 98). In this particular case, twenty-five to thirty Pakistanis, led by Shahid Naqshbandi, came out of the mosque to join the grave. A group of six people in charge of the *chadar* carried it, unfolded it and held it by the ends. On the way, the members recited Urdu poems about the Prophet and religious songs[29].

Figure 3 : The end of the *chadar poshi* ritual performed by the Barelvi order

Source: Pascale Bugnon. Photo blurred by Facepixelizer: https://www.facepixelizer.com/

Once inside the tomb, the members of the brotherhood covered it with their new clothes. As soon as they were finished, they resumed reciting prayers and poems written by the founder of the movement, Ahmad Raza Khan (Syed, 2019: 101). After half an hour of recitation, they performed a *du'a* together and gradually left the mausoleum. Some remained there, gathering

[28] Term used by Imam Wang Wenjie at the end of the official ceremony.
[29] See video provided by one of my Pakistani informants: https://www.academia.edu/video/kA6Ddj.

in religious silence, while outside we began to organise the *lungar*, the communal meal that usually marks the end of a '*urs*. This meal is of great importance because it is said that the food prepared contains *baraka*. In this particular case, the meal was not eaten among the community members, but was distributed in the form of small packets to take away. After the food distribution was over, the workshippers dispersed and left the site.

4.3 Discontent, clashes and conflicts

The practices carried out around or inside the tomb are at the centre of discontent and conflict for the followers of a "strict" Islam. For the latter, a wide range of practices and festivities are considered indecent and un-Islamic, such as circumambulating, offering, kowtowing, touching or kissing the tomb, or even celebrating the birth of the Prophet (Malwid, 圣纪). Indeed, many informants said they were dissatisfied with the spectacle that unfolded before their eyes during the weekly practices or during the *Darenji* festival: the practice of worshipping tombs went against the very tenets of Islam, which advocates equality for all. The veneration of a saint, however emblematic, contradicted all these precepts. Moreover, the circumambulation of the tomb was highly inappropriate, since it is usually only practised in Mecca, around the Ka'aba. As the centre of very heterogeneous practices, the tomb is the object of various kinds of dissatisfaction, which not only leads to verbal discontent but also to physical conflict. As a frequent visitor to the tomb, I have on several occasions witnessed confrontations between the followers of a "strict" Islam and those who practise these "popular" or Sufi rites, where the intervention of a third party was necessary to prevent the confrontation from degenerating into violence - and this happened far more often than I would have imagined. On many occasions, when I was in the tomb, people would speak to me in a loud voice, telling me not to imitate what others were doing, i.e. kissing the tomb, touching it, walking around it, leaving offerings there, or even asking for the saint's intercession. One particularly warm day, when the tomb was full of worshippers, a Pakistani man came in and watched for a few minutes. He looked disapprovingly, took a few pictures and began to mutter some unintelligible words. Then he walked over to a foreign man and asked him in English, "What are they doing?". With no particular response, he spoke a little louder: "It's *haram*! (forbidden)". No one reacted. He tried twice to get a general condemnation of these practices, but no one responded . He stared at us for a few moments and then walked away, muttering "*haram*, *haram*". This kind of reaction is not unique to foreign Muslims rebelling against local practices: it is also the case with some Chinese Muslims, especially those belonging to the *Yihewani* current.

A more subtle but equally interesting source of controversy about the practices surrounding the tomb are the books displayed in the mosques of Guangzhou and in the tomb. These works are brought and deposited by the faithful, and the mosque leaders are not very careful about their content. Among the "classical" books, such as the Koran or other exegetical texts, a significant number of books are actually propaganda, publications published mainly by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which emphasize basic knowledge about Islam and "correct" religious practices. Some of these works are translated directly into Chinese, while others are in Arabic, English or other languages. The tomb of Sa'id ibn Abi Waqqas contains copies of the Wahhabi Koran, which condemns Sufism and the practice of worshipping saints. Conversely, the books available in the mosque compound were mainly works that promoted the Barelvi movement, i.e. emphasising Sufi practices and the worship of graves. The distribution of this literature thus reveals a divide between the proponents and the opponents of the worship of the saints, reflecting the old debates that still exist about the 'good' practice of Islam. These controversies stem from different interpretations and practices of Islam that are crystallised in this place, which is considered in official discourse to be a high "cultural" place

of world Islam. Within Chinese Islam itself, theological controversies have a long history and are very present, especially in the north-west, where the Sufi brotherhoods are numerically significant. In the large cities of the south-east, however, this problem has only recently arisen, mainly because of internal migration and the frequent attendance of mosques by these populations, bringing with them their specific practices and their local conflicts (Bai and al., 2010; Wu, 2014: Doyon, 2014: 111; Zhang, 2017) . This influx of new Muslims has attracted the attention of local authorities, who fear "contradictions and frictions" [矛盾和摩擦] between Muslims from elsewhere and local Muslims, as well as with local administrations. As a result, the official position of religious leaders in Guangzhou must take these issues into account while inserting their discourse in the direction of the "Sinicisation of Islam" (Wang, 2017; Yang, 2018), thus providing a median and consensual voice beyond sectarian debates (Wang, 2017).

4.4 Translocal practices in China and localised adaptations

The commemoration of *Darenji* and the everyday practices that take place in and around the mausoleum of Sa'id ibn Abi Waqqas are extremely eloquent cases of the various ritual declensions, semantic and performative issues that take place around the tomb, of which the coexistence of all these forms is a fundamental element. In a society like China's, where religion is undergoing a far-reaching privatisation - or at least a profound resemantisation – secularisation can serve as a strategy for religious institutions to reassert their public character. The *Darenji* festival is therefore a heuristic example of the intertwining of politics and "tradition", showing how official authorities collaborate with different communities by tacitly endorsing their cultural projects and using them to legitimise their cultural policies. In fact, local religious authorities accredit other worship projects (as in the case of the Hui and Barelvi groups). They closely monitor the activities that take place there, without the groups themselves seeking and/or obtaining official permission[30]. The tomb therefore occupies a special place in the Cantonese landscape, which the authorities must take into account in their management of the site. Fully aware of the social, cultural and above all political stakes of the festival, they manage their relations with these groups while maintaining control over the meaning and course of the event (Graezer, 2003: 291). While the official discourse focuses exclusively on the "local tradition", the leaders of the Islamic Association are well aware of worship practices that are far removed from this official vulgate. With regard to the diversity of practices, Sufi, "popular" and "foreign", the semantic transformation allows certain rituals to be practised, while at the same time circumscribing them in a language audible to the official, local and national authorities.

In the face of dominant secular ideologies, religious personnel are able to reinvent religious meanings by borrowing material and discursive resources to bolster their legitimacy, especially by drawing on "tradition" (Ji, 2007: 161). This "tradition" is also transformed to suit new political and social ambitions. This iterative and dialogical movement allows these institutions to maintain good relations and a peaceful and positive image in the eyes of the authorities, the masses of believers and their non-Muslim neighbours. In this sense, the staff of local Islamic associations are not reluctant to have their site listed as a national heritage site. In fact, the registration of a building by the Cultural Heritage Department leads to funding for its restoration. As two members of the Islamic Association of Guangzhou explained to me, although the administrative work may be more complex and the number of intermediaries more

[30] The Northwest Hui and Barelvi are self-organising on the site, without legal permission but with the tacit consent of the Islamic Association of Guangzhou. Personal communication with a member of the Islamic Association of Guangzhou.

numerous, the mediation of assets facilitates the granting of funds that could not be obtained with a request of a religious nature. In addition, the monuments in question generate new interest and can be a source of pride and prestige. Heritage thus becomes a programme whose benefits, although differentiated, are largely shared by all the authorities involved.

This process of accommodation makes it possible to "maintain stability" through the collusion between the religious and political worlds, in particular through the semantic bias of "tradition". Although this "tradition" is understood in different ways[31], it is through it that social actors, supported by the patrimonial process, can construct and manipulate different levels of identity and fight for the management of resources and the definition of economic actions. In official speeches, political representatives make these communities both a symbol and an example of the success of the government's Reforms and Opening-Up since the early 1980s: symbiosis of Chinese and Muslim cultures, the slogan of "unity-harmony", economic development - adaptation to market socialism, promotion of education (Hille, 2011: 147). Heritage sites associated with "traditions" are thus updated, legitimising both religious and political practices. If these actors had a paradoxical attitude, sometimes hostile, sometimes supportive of "tradition", the paradox is only apparent because the objectives are not perceived as mutually exclusive, either at the level of practice or at the level of ideas. Indeed, the need to combat certain "sectarian" and "extremist" manifestations does not prevent the valorisation of certain parts of "Chinese culture", particularly in the field of "tradition". By appropriating of the language of heritage as it evolves in the Chinese public sphere, religious actors exert considerable influence on the reframing of objects, language and practices as heritage, which allows the practitioners themselves to continue practising their rituals.

In the specific case of the Barelvi, the reappropriation of the terminology of "tradition" allows them to partially maintaintheir practices in the Chinese context. These regular and occasional rituals structure opportunities for individuals to make sense of their stay in Guangzhou. Indeed, as a local, translocal and/or transnational site, the tomb of Sa'id ibn Abi Waqqas tomb is crucial for making sense not only of the place-making religious strategies but also of the processes of belonging that Pakistanis have structured.

5. Concluding Remarks: place-making and structures of belonging

China's opening up to the world has meant a search for, or an imagining of, a more cosmopolitan past and heritage, and attempts to present China as a multicultural society in order to attract both foreign investment and tourists. In this process, the Barelvi have been able to adapt to the Chinese context and carve out a significant place for themselves in the local religious landscape, but the top-down heritagisation process has given rise to new actors who may have their own agendas and express different views. At the same time, the language of heritage has also opened up space for individual citizens and local communities to celebrate and protect their own traditions and local history. Individual citizens and communities are

[31] Opposition to Sufi brotherhoods and the worship of graves was a constant in the programme of Muslim reformists and the political regimes they inspired in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And the debate is far from over. In certain regions of China, however, some collusion has taken place: for example, between the *Gedimu* and the followers of the *Khuffiyya*: see Lipman, 1997: 220; Dillon, 2001: 20. Collusion with Sufi brotherhoods has also been observed among supporters of the anti-Sufi Yihewani movement: Chérif-Chebbi, personal communication..

experiencing, performing, and documenting heritage in a more bottom-up way, sometimes outside of the state narrative, while at the same time many actors seek to capitalise on the official heritage discourse to gain legitimacy for their own histories and traditions. As I showed, the Barelvi brotherhood appropriates the heritage discourse and the capacity of voices and agencies. In the process, however, new conflicts have emerged of, both among these actors and in their relationship with the fragmented authoritarian state, occurred but there is room for accommodation.

However, the experience of Barelvi transnational migrants in Guangzhou shows that while place-making is indeed a generator of common identities and opportunities for collective mobilisation, it is also an unstable process that does not necessarily lead to the perpetuation of collective Muslimness in the host country. Indeed, when people of different nationalities, schools, etc. pray together in the mosque, there is little or no communication or connection between them outside the mosque (Ma, 2006; Allès, 2013: 97). This state of affairs was physically visible during the commemoration of the anniversary of the death of Sa'id ibn Abi Waqqas, where each group and each community found themselves within the mosque compound, but performing very different rituals without any connection to each other. In the specific case of the *chadar poshi* ritual, and despite the Imam's announcement of this "foreign ceremony" [外国仪式], the participants were only Pakistanis, and no members of other Muslim communities took part, not even the official representatives of the mosque.

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