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The legend of the “Tomb of the Forty Sages” in Guangzhou

Introduction

The site called “Ancient Sage mausoleum” (先贤古墓 *Xianxian gumu*) in Guangzhou, reputed to house the alleged tomb of Sa’d ibn Abi-Waqqas, is surrounded by many other graves and stelae. Among them is a tomb locally named the “Tomb of the Forty Sages” (四十位先贤碑 *Sishi wei xianxian bei*), which was restored in 1955 by the People’s Municipal Government of Guangzhou (Yang, 2002: 27). Its epigraph, dated 1802 (嘉庆 *Jiaqing* reign), etched the legend that these sages had come together with Waqqas as envoys of Prophet Muhammad.

Illustration n°1: “Tomb of the Forty Sages”



Source: Pascale Bugnon, 2018

Illustration n°2: Stele of the “Forty Sages”



Source: Pascale Bugnon, 2017

The stele presents the following story:

Chinese transcription

四十位先贤碑

墨底纳国肆拾位先贤奉至圣穆罕默德差遣赉送天经，协同苏哈白斡葛思传教入中国，始于唐贞观年间。时到班次聚礼，偶遇强人尽弑。其强骇然，自尽同归，竟为舍希德仙游，埋葬凑成肆拾壹位先贤舍希德之墓。原有古碑，年久字矇，今照原碑刊勒。

嘉庆七年孟冬 重勒

English translation

Stele of the Forty Sages

Forty sages of the country of Medina were sent by the Holy Prophet Muhammad to deliver the Holy Scriptures, in collaboration with Sahaba Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas (苏哈白斡葛思 *Suhabai Wo Gesi*)¹ to preach into China, which began during the Tang Zhenguan period². When it was time to pray, they met by accident a robber who killed them all. Panicked, the robber reached the same fate by committing suicide. All these *shahids* (舍希德 *shexide*, martyrs) ascended to heaven. Their bodies were gathered in the same pit and buried there. We can call them all forty-one martyrs and this tomb is that of the Shahids. This inscription was re-engraved from another very old inscription whose characters have been worn away by time.

Date: Re-carved in the second month of the winter, the seventh year of Jiaqing Reign (1802).

Commentary

This tomb anchors the legend of Sa'd ibn Abi-Waqqas in the constitution of the site in Guangzhou as a founding saint, to which it adds the dimension of martyrdom. The figure of the *shahid* (martyr) is an interesting part of this epigraph, as it is very seldom studied by the academic world, Chinese or international.³ Although it is of course difficult to clearly verify the authenticity of this monumental stone inscription⁴, the use of this concept of martyr in nineteenth-century epigraphy casts light on two important aspects of Chinese Islam at that time. The first is the reflection of the apprehension of the hostile environment in which Chinese Muslims lived then, through the popularity of martyrs who sacrificed their

¹ There are different transcriptions of the name Sa'd ibn Abi-Waqqas in Chinese literature. In this paper, I refer to the Chinese characters used on the stele inscription.

² Zhenguan (627-649), title of the reign of Li Shimin (李世民), second emperor of the Tang Dynasty, called posthumously Tang Taizong (唐太宗).

³ I would like to warmly thank WANG Jianping for his confidence and for giving me the opportunity to read his article before its publication.

⁴ The historicity is difficult to authenticate although some researchers, such as Yang Junhou, rely on an archaeological discovery made in 1959 during urban planning work around the site. Indeed, during the construction of the expressway and the requisition of land on the site of the Ancient Sage, the tomb of the forty sages was moved and a piece of copper bearing the inscription "Huang Song Tongbao" [皇宋通宝] was found, confirming according to the author the dating of the site between the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty (Yang, 2002: 27-28).

life for the maintenance of Islamic faith in a non-Muslim society (Wang, 2022). The second, and probably the most interesting, is the treatment reserved for the robber: having understood the seriousness of his action, he commits suicide as a sign of repentance (*tawba*). This act allows him to be buried with the Sages, demonstrating the kindness and forgiveness enshrined in Islam.

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