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Religious Blending along the Maritime Silk Roads: The Case of Muslim’s Descendants in Baiqi Village (Quanzhou City, China)

The religious contacts along the Maritime Silk Routes gave rise to multiple borrowings and religious hybridizations. The penetration of Islam in China, and increased contacts with Chinese cultures, witnessed several ritual reconfigurations whose effects are still noticeable today. In this short paper, I will discuss the case study of the village of Baiqi, near Quanzhou City in Fujian Province, where a Chinese lineage, the Guo clan 郭, performs a Chinese ritual with Islamic¹ characteristics. Indeed, the members of this lineage do not claim to practice Islam but mainly to be the *descendants* of Muslim merchants who settled in China’s South-Eastern coast during the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1279-1368) dynasties. Since the fourteenth century, many of these merchants intermarried with local residents, gradually assimilating to the rest of the Han (Chinese) population. Today, they resemble their Han neighbors in almost every aspect. Many of them, however, still commemorate their foreign origin and, in some cases, even claim a separate unique identity. The ritual practices of ancestral worship are a central component of the religious and spiritual world of the population of Southeast China. The descendants of Muslims in Southeast China, like their Han neighbors, perform these rituals meticulously. Nevertheless, their worship has some unique features that include customs and taboos in the offerings which they present to their Muslim ancestors. In this presentation, I will discuss the specificities of this community, which are closely related to the history of the Maritime Silk Road in China, focusing on one ritual: the *Qingming* Festival (translated into English as the “Tomb-Sweeping Day”).

The Maritime Silk Roads

The network of sea routes, known today as the Maritime Silk Roads, links the East with the West and connects China, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Arabian Peninsula,

¹ A term invented by the global historian Marshall Hodgson. Its single-line definition is best etched by Srinivas Aravamudan when he notes that Islamicate is “the hybrid trace rather than pure presence or absence of Islam” (Aravamudan Srinivas, 2014, “East-West Fiction as World Literature: The Hayy Problem Reconfigured”, in: *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol.47, n°2, pp.195-231.)

Somalia, Egypt and Europe. As one of the most ancient transcontinental trading routes in the world, dating back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), these roads have played a defining role in world history, including the spread of diverse religions and spiritualities. In China, Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Yangzhou, Hangzhou and Ningbo were the most important regional trade centers, in which was developed a rich diversity.

Figure 1: Map of Silk Roads



Representation of land and maritime Silk roads at the Jingjue mosque (净觉清真寺) in Nanjing. (Photograph Pascale Bugnon, 2018)

Quanzhou, a prefecture-level city of Fujian Province, is characteristic of these exchanges along the Maritime Silk Roads. This city was China's major port for foreign traders, which was known as Zaitun, during the 11th through 14th centuries. It is said to have been visited by both Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, and both travellers praised it as one of the most prosperous and glorious cities in the world. During the heyday of the city (e.g. 10th-14th century), with the development of maritime communications and the prosperity of maritime trade, Quanzhou (Zaitun) became the meeting point of different cultures of the world. Merchants, missionaries, envoys, travelers, nobles and civilians from Asia, Africa and Europe stayed here. Persians, Arabs, Indians and Europeans brought not only priceless treasures but also diverse cultures and religions.

Eventually, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and folk beliefs flourished and interacted with one another in Quanzhou.

Figure 2: Maps of Fujian Province and Quanzhou's city



Source : <https://www.chinahighlights.com/fujian/map.htm>, last time consulted 4th December 2019

In this process, foreign religions such as Christianity, Manichaeism, Hinduism and Islam enriched one another as they became durably established. This is illustrated by the diversity of historic religious sites and monuments in the city of Quanzhou. The Guandi temple, God of War, the Mazu temple (Goddess of Sea), or the Kaiyuan temple (with its twin pagoda towers, it is one of the oldest Buddhist temples in China), whilst the Laojun statue (the biggest Chinese stone statue of its kind), illustrates the presence of Taoism. In terms of foreign religions, there are some Christian churches, the Cao'an Manichaean temple which hosts the only stone statue of the Manichaean prophet, Mani or some Hindu remains. And finally, the Muslim heritage: the Qingjing Mosque, one of the oldest mosques in China and two Muslim tombs, called the Lingshan Holy Tombs, which are seen by the Chinese government as witnesses to the long-lasting interaction between Quanzhou and the Arab-Islamic world.

Indeed, for the Chinese historiography, the existence of the tombs of two Muslim sages on Lingshan Hill ("Miracle Hill") constitutes important evidence for the early relationship between Quanzhou and Muslim merchants. According to the book of *Min Shu* 《闽书 - 方域志 - 灵山》, written by Ming dynasty historian He Qiaoyuan, they were four sages among the disciples of Muhammed, who came to China in Wude period (618-626) of the Tang Dynasty. The sages

did missionary work in Guangzhou, Yangzhou and Quanzhou respectively, and then two of them, who came to Quanzhou, died and were buried on the Lingshan Hill.

Researchers and scholars debate the authenticity of the tombs' dates and to whom they belonged to. Indeed, a few extant sources reveal that contacts between the Tang dynasty (618-907) and the Islamic caliphates existed during this early period. Official Chinese histories mention thirty-three Arab diplomatic missions, in charge of maintaining peaceful relations with the Tang Dynasty between 651 and 750. However, Arabic sources corroborate few of these accounts and we do not know how many of these missions were dispatched by the Islamic rulers². If this story is to be considered as a legend, other later testimonies allow us to get an idea of the vitality of Islam in Quanzhou. A number of famous medieval explorers, such as Marco Polo or Ibn Battuta, wrote descriptions of the port of Quanzhou as one of the biggest harbors in the world, with ships of all sizes and provenances docking and setting sail, and a vibrant market in which merchants from across many different regions exchanged their wares. Here is the description made by Ibn Battuta in his work "Travel" in the 14th century.

When we had crossed the sea the first city to which we came was Zaitun [...] It is a huge and important city in which are manufactured the fabrics of velvet, damask and satin which are known by its name and which are superior to those of Khansa (Hangzhou) and Khan Baliq (Beijing). Its Harbor is among the biggest in the world, or rather is the biggest: I have seen about a hundred big junks there and innumerable little ones. [...] The Muslims live in a separate city. [...] In every city of China is a quarter where the Muslims live separately and have mosques for their Friday prayers and other assemblies. They are highly regarded and treated with respect. The Chinese infidels eat the meat of pigs and dogs and sell it in the bazars³.

With these words, he not only described the city of Quanzhou (Zaitun) but also its Muslim population's lifestyle. Like many thousands of Muslim merchants who sailed to China, Ibn Battuta arrived in 1345 travelling the Maritime Silk Route, from the Indian Ocean to the port of Quanzhou. Between the years 1087-1368 this port served as a main entry gate into China. Many of the Arab and Persian merchants settled in Quanzhou, and in time it became a large and thriving Muslim settlement. Ibn Battuta arrived to Quanzhou at a time in which the policies

² PARK Hyunhee, 2012, Mapping Chinese and Islamic Worlds. Cross-cultural Exchange in Pre-modern Asia, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.6.

³ GIBB H.A.R. Gibb, trans., 1994, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, AD 1325-1354*. Vol.4, London; Hakluyt Society, pp.894, 890.

of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty had brought great growth and prosperity to the Muslim community in the city. According to Chinese historiography, these Arab and Persian merchants established in Quanzhou gradually mixed with local populations and became assimilated (*hanhua* 汉化) until they formed “Chinese Muslim” communities, known today as the ethnic group categorized by the Chinese government as “Hui” 回.

A Slow Process of Assimilation

The process of assimilation of Muslim communities went through different phases. During the Song Dynasty, Fujian became an important economic center, and the city of Quanzhou became one of the world’s largest port cities. An increasing volume of international trade had a crucial role in stimulating the economic development of Quanzhou and its surroundings with a growing flow of foreign merchants arrived in the city: many of them were Muslims who began forming an active and organized community⁴. The foreigners in the port cities of Southeast China settled for the most part in designated neighborhoods known as *fanfang* 蕃坊 (residential districts of foreign guests). As a result, these foreign communities remained mostly disconnected from the Chinese and did not consider themselves an integral part of the local society.

With the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty, new policies were adopted which brought tremendous changes to the integration of Muslim visitors in China. The Mongols were reluctant to allow their new Han Chinese subjects to manage state affairs so they created a social system in four classes: 1) the Mongols; 2) the *semuren* (色目人), people of “various categories”, or “special status” who were composed of non-Chinese officials, mostly from western regions, and many of them were Muslims; 3) *Hanren* (汉人) (North Chinese); 4) *Nanren* (南人) (South Chinese)⁵. The Mongols rulers assigned the Muslims the majority of the empire’s administrative positions. They played a major role in foreign trade, largely contributing to Yuan Dynasty’s tax and customs income, the Mongol regime granted them privileged in order to sustain their activities⁶. The Muslim dominance in Quanzhou reached its abrupt end shortly before the fall of the Yuan Dynasty, following a violent and destructive uprising by the local

⁴ FAN Ke, 2001, Identity Politics in South Fujian Hui Communities, Unpublished dissertation, University of Washington ; ABT Oded, 2012, Muslim Ancestry and Chinese Identity in Southeast China, PhD, School of Historical Studies, Tel Aviv University, p.22.

⁵ LESLIE Donald Daniel, 1998, « The integration of religious minorities in China: The case of Chinese Muslims. The Fifth-ninth Georges Earnest Morison Lecture in Ethnology », Canberra: Australian National University. <http://chinainstitute.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/morrison59.pdf>, p.11.

⁶ ABT, 2012, *op.cit.*, p.30.

garrison, known as the *Yi-si-ba-xi* rebellion (亦思巴奚战乱), composed mainly of members of the city's Persian community. In addition to the chaotic times of the late Yuan, the government policy to ban maritime trade in the early Ming and the decision of the emperor Chengzu (1402-1424) to move the capital back to Beijing, were all factors that slowed the economy in the south for a period of time. Beijing resumed its central position in both politics and in the economy.

For a certain period of time the movement of the Hui population shifted toward the north and many large Hui communities were established there⁷. As a result, the Muslim presence in the city also greatly decreased, reinforced by the rise of the Ming dynasty, which instituted an ambivalent policy towards his Muslim subjects. Many Muslim notable and officials received favorable treatment from the government and were quickly incorporated into the newly established government institutions and army. However, there were usually Muslims who were deeply embedded in society, and in Chinese culture, who did not assert their Muslim origins⁸. With its rise to power, the Ming founder issued an order that prohibited Muslims to marry within, and forced them to intermarry with non-Muslims. This order apparently intended to minimize and mitigate the power of the Muslims as a separate group by integrating them into Chinese society⁹. In the beginning of the Ming Dynasty an accelerated process of “sinicization” – an assimilation of the Han's cultural norms – occurred among the Muslims in China and those of Southeast China in particular. By the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) most of those communities were fully transformed into lineage bearing local cultural and religious characteristics and were left with very little traces of their original foreign identity. In Quanzhou, more than in other places, the Muslim descendants adopted traditions and lifestyles that were similar to those of their Han neighbors, until becoming indistinguishable from them¹⁰. It was not until the proclamation of the People's Republic of China that certain lineages, claiming to be descendants of Muslims, were recognized as Hui, the ethnic denomination used in China to categorize what is commonly called “Chinese Muslims”. The main lineages concerned are the Guo, Ding 丁, Jin 金, Pu 蒲, Su 苏 and others all over the coastal regions of Southeast China and Taiwan. Among the reasons invoked to claim this ethnicity is that of the maintenance of certain ritual

⁷ FAN, 2001, *op.cit.*, p.77.

⁸ DILLON Michael, 1999, *China's Muslim Hui Community. Migration, Settlement and Sects*. U.K: Curzon, pp.31-33 ; BEN-DOR BENITE Zvi, 2005, *The Dao of Muhammad. A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*, Cambridge and London, Harvard East Asian Monographs, pp.21-24; ABT, 2012, *op.cit.*, p.48-49.

⁹ ABT, 2012, *Ibid.*, p.49.

¹⁰ FAN, 2001, *op.cit.*; ABT, 2012, *op.cit.*, p.57.

peculiarities that would recall their so-called distant Muslim ancestors. Through the case study of the Qingming Festival, I will now present some of these aspects.

The Qingming Festival among the Baiqi Guo

The Guo lineage is primarily settled in Baiqi, in Hui'an County, near the city of Quanzhou. The population of the Guo lineage is more than 15.000 and is distributed among a number of villages, known as the « Guo lineage of nine towns ». According to their recorded family history, Guo Deguang, the founding father of the lineage, came to Quanzhou during the Yuan Dynasty and settled in a village called Fashi in Jinjiang County. During the Hongwu reign of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1398), Guo Zhongyuan, a member of the third generation, moved to Baiqi. From then on, the Guo lineage settled there and made their living through shipping and fishing¹¹.

Figure 3: Location of Baiqi village



Source: <https://www.google.com/maps>, modified by the author.

According to the Guo family's genealogy, in the early seventeenth century, “from the eighth and ninth generations [of the Guo in Baiqi], they totally abandoned the [Muslim] religion, probably during the middle of the Wan Li reign period [1573-1620]”¹². It seems that for

¹¹ Information obtained at the Quanzhou Maritime Museum.

¹² “Shi Hui Bian” 适回辨 in *Baiqi Guo Shi Huizu Zongpu* 百奇郭氏回族宗谱. 上. [Genealogy of the Hui of Guo Family of Baiqi], vol.1, p.15., quoted by Abt, 2012, *op.cit.*, 79

hundreds of years, until the 16th century, all the descendants of the Guo family in Baiqi preserved their Muslim faith¹³. One of the essays in their genealogy states that the disasters and hardships that accompanied the pirate attacks of the Jia Jing period (1522-1566) brought an end to the regular observance of religious Muslims rituals¹⁴. Nowadays, the vast majority of the Muslims' Descendants share the beliefs of Buddhism, Daoist religion, Christianity or popular Chinese religion, with the rest of Fujian's population but they keep some unique customs that indicate the Muslim identity of their ancestors in some rituals as that of Qingming Jie.

Ancestor Worship With Muslim Characteristics

Through this long process of assimilation, the Muslims' descendants gradually adopted some customs of their Han neighbors, including ancestor worship which is one of the central components of the religious world in China. Indeed, in Chinese thought, the realm of the dead, and the role of the dead within it, are perceived as a direct continuation of actions in life, where it is impossible to separate the realm of the dead from the world of the living. The souls of the deceased ancestors continue to play a central role in the daily routine and life of their living descendants. They have the ability to influence events in their relatives' lives and therefore, they should be particularly satisfied. In order to achieve this, every person has to preserve the memory of their ancestors and to present offerings to them, especially during the commemoration of their death and certain other rituals.

In conducting rituals of memorial and of presenting offering, the living express their obligation, gratitude and respect to the ancestors who granted them life and everything they accomplished during it¹⁵. The most common offerings are incense, candles, food, drinks and paper money, etc. All those items are essential for their existence in the afterworld. Neglecting to fulfill one's obligations would make the soul furious, and cause disaster and trouble for the people of the household or the community, hence the importance of ancestor worship. Ancestral halls and shrines are the most important sites for ancestor worship: accordingly, those halls constitute the focus for holding organized rituals of the family or the lineage, and for the common identity of descendants of the ancestors to whom the shrines are dedicated¹⁶. All those aspects of ancestor worship are performed by the Guo lineage in Baiqi, but they add some special features that

¹³ Fan, 2001, *op.cit.* ; Abt, 2012, *op.cit.*, p.79.

¹⁴ Guo Zhichao, 郭志超. "Chendai Ding Yu Baiqi Guo Hanhua De BijiaoYanjiu" 陈埭丁与白奇郭汉化的比较研究 (A Comparative Study of the Process of Being Assimilated by the Hans Between the Ding Clan of Chendai and the Guo Clan of Baiqi). In, *Chendai Huiyushi Yanjiu* 陈埭回族史研究 (Research on Chendai Hui Nationality History), ed. Chen Guoqiang 陈国强. Beijing: China Academy of Social Sciences Press, 1990, pp. 308, quoted by ABT, 2012, *Ibid.*, p.79.

¹⁵ ABT, 2012, *Ibid.*, p.75.

¹⁶ ABT, 2012, *Ibid.*, p.101.

remain the Muslim ancestors: the main prominent aspects are those of Quran offerings and the taboo on offering pork to the ancestors.

During the *Qingming* Festival, the Guo community gathers at the ancestral temple of the village with a lot of music and dance. On two long tables placed in the middle of the temple, the many offerings are spread out, which will later be gradually offered to the ancestors of the lineage. At first sight, these offerings seem similar to those offered by any Chinese lineage. However, one particular element stands out: a copy of the Qur'an. Although the Baiqi Guo inhabitants no longer use the Qur'an for Muslim religious purposes, they still use it on the basis that it had special significance for their forefathers. Because their ancestors were Muslims, they use the copies of the Quran, which to these ancestors, possessed a religious significance. In other words, the copies of the Quran provide the Muslims' descendants with a means for propitiating their remote ancestors. The descendants present them as offerings for the ancestors' use, because they have symbolic significance in denoting their foreign origins¹⁷. While hardly anyone among the Baiqi Guo can read the Holy Book, or any other Arabic text, and people lack basic knowledge of their contents, they attribute great importance to them. It does not have any Islamic religious value, but it symbolizes the reactivation a collective memory. As Abt Oded noted in his research, during funerals the Qur'an is also used in Baiqi, carried facing up in the hands of the family member who walks at the head of the funeral procession (a concept known as *peng jing* – 捧经 – “bearing the Holy Book on the palms”¹⁸).

Figure 4: The Holy Book's Offering



screenshot made from :

https://m.youku.com/video/id_XMzUzMzQwNTU2MA==.html?x=&sharefrom=android&source=&from=groupmessage&isappinstalled=0&ishttps=1

¹⁷ ABT, 2012, *Ibid.*, p.99-100.

¹⁸ ABT, 2012, *Ibid.*, p.99.

Another important component of differentiation during the festival is the taboo of pork. As I mentioned earlier, the communities examined here are not Muslim. But they are refraining from offering pork to their ancestors on a principle common to all who uphold Chinese ancestor worship, which consists of prescribing the serving of all the needs and desires of the souls of the departed. This way of doing is inscribed in their genealogy. In “A List of Forbidden Foodstuff for Offerings to the Ancestors”, we read: *In making offerings one must comply with our origins and follow our distant roots. [...] the manner of slaughtering the sacrifices and the utensils used for it must be in accordance with Muslims laws [...] one shall not use hornless domesticated animals as sacrifices for the ancestors [...]. In our family, the use of pork is forbidden*¹⁹. Again, this configuration does not reflect Islamic considerations or any belief in Islam, but a mark of respect for their remote ancestors. Since this food taboo is present in everyday practices among the Baiqi Guo, it even became a source of jokes. Often I was told with a smile: “Our ancestors were Arabs and Persians and that is why we do not offer them pork during rituals, but we eat pork every day.”

Figure 5: Offerings without pork meat



Source: Pascale Bugnon (2018)

¹⁹ “Kailie si xianren suo bu yong zhi pinhuwei” 开列祀先人所不用之品乎味 [A list of Food Products that are Forbidden for use as sacrifices for Ancestors], in *Baiqi Guoshi Huizu Zongpu* 百奇郭氏回族宗谱上 [Genealogy of the Hui of Guo Family of Baiqi], vol.1, p.22., quoted by ABT, 2012, *Ibid.*, p.70.

At the end of the festival, all the participants, in small groups, go to the altar of the ancestors and practice the kowtow. As illustrated on Fig. 6, the altar of ancestors is decorated with a representation of Mecca and Kaaba. This innovation, quite recent, looks like an attempt to legitimize the Baiqi Guo's particularities and display their differences with other religious groups. Again, as in the case of the Qu'ran offering or the taboo of pork, these markers do not reflect religious value but are an undeniable pride for this community and a way to be differentiated from their Chinese neighbors. Ancestor worship in this context is not only a means for Muslims' descendants to interact with their ancestors in the religious sense, but also a means for establishing their unique identity today²⁰. The ancestor worship reflects their foreign origin but, it also indicates their assimilation into Chinese society. The full adoption of ancestor worship is evidence of the cultural and religious assimilation that they went through. This process of sinicization is not a unidirectional movement, but rather ritualistic borrowings that allow the community to position itself in Chinese society.

Figure 6: Ancestral altar in Baiqi with the representation of Mecca



Source: Pascale Bugnon, 2018

²⁰ ABT, 2012, *Ibid.*, p.137.

Conclusion

The Maritime Silk Routes are often invoked as having “nurtured Quanzhou people with open and inclusive characters”, demonstrating “a high degree of tolerance with respect to indigenous religions”. Although the people of Quanzhou actively absorbed elements of foreign religions to develop a distinctive culture integrating indigenous and maritime features, as we have seen in the case of Muslims’ descendants in Baiqi village, it should not be overlooked that processes such as described in this paper not only lead to religious blending but also to political statements. Anthropologists who worked on Muslims’ descendants in southeastern China (e.g. Dru Gladney or Fan Ke)²¹, have shown how the recognition by the Chinese government of some lineages in Quanzhou as Chinese Muslims (Hui), even if most Muslims’ descendants in Fujian hardly maintain any religious observances, serve political aims. Indeed, the claim to be categorized as Chinese Muslims is based on a vague memory of an ancient origin from Persia and Arab sojourners of the Song-Yuan era, which lacks a sense of deep and authentic intimacy with the ancient ancestors. In some cases, the link to the ancestors can even be described as “scholarly” in nature, based upon official histories or contemporary research rather than a living memory²². In this context, the recognition of their distinctive history implies several economic and social benefits that must not be neglected. On a picture displayed at the Quanzhou Maritime Museum, the representation of Mecca and the Kaaba in the Baiqi Ancestral Hall wasn’t exhibited few years ago. But it appeared recently, where it fits a new political context.

Figure 7: Baiqi Ancestral Hall



Source: Quanzhou Maritime Museum

²¹ See for example: FAN, 2001, *op.cit.* and GLADNEY Dru C., 1991, « Contemporary Ethnic Identity of Muslim Descendants Along the Chinese Maritime Silk Route », International Seminar for UNESCO Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue “China and the Maritime Silk Route”. 17-20 February 1991. Quanzhou, China.

²² ABT, 2012, *op.cit.*, p.66.

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