Reflecting on muslim diversity in China

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Abstract

The diversity of Islam that we observe today in China has its origins in a centuries-old relationship with Chinese society, which has taken many forms and touched upon various political, institutional, cultural or economic issues. While we tend to posit a global Islam that exists as an abstract ideal, we attempt at the same time to remain mindful of the regional variations that make it impossible to reduce the tradition to a monolith. The emergence of new approaches to the study of religion and / or ethnic minorities has challenged previous research methodologies. In the PRC especially, and for more than thirty years already, the presence of foreign Muslims, new conversions to Islam, ethnic blending, or the emergence of new policies to project Islamic cultural heritage, encompass a complex mosaic of accommodation, adjustment, preservation, and, at times, resistance, which reveal new meanings created by communities who attempt to reconcile perceived disparities between Islamic ideals and changing social realities. This Islamic revival is a new phenomenon that complexifies even further the study of Islam in China. In order […]

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The diversity of Islam that we observe today in China has its origins in a centuries-old relationship with Chinese society, which has taken many forms and touched upon various political, institutional, cultural or economic issues. While we tend to posit a global Islam that exists as an abstract ideal, we attempt at the same time to remain mindful of the regional variations that make it impossible to reduce the tradition to a monolith. The emergence of new approaches to the study of religion and/or ethnic minorities has challenged previous research methodologies. In the PRC especially, and for more than thirty years already, the presence of foreign Muslims, new conversions to Islam, ethnic blending, or the emergence of new policies to project Islamic cultural heritage, encompass a complex mosaic of accommodation, adjustment, preservation, and, at times, resistance, which reveal new meanings created by communities who attempt to reconcile perceived disparities between Islamic ideals and changing social realities.

This Islamic revival is a new phenomenon that complexifies even further the study of Islam in China. In order to report on this, the Confucius Institute, with financial support from the Academic Society of the University of Geneva and the Swiss National Science Fondation, organised the colloquium *Islam(s) in China. Reflecting on Muslim Diversity* on Wednesday June 26 and Thursday June 27, 2019.

Framed by diverse reflections throughout China, this workshop aimed to discuss broadly this large process and to highlight differences among places, times, and persons with ambition of giving new perspectives on the study of Islam and its diversity in China through four thematic axes: Reflections on Chinese Sufism, Islams and politics, Islamic Reconfigurations and Redefining Ethnicity and Belonging.
Reflections on Chinese Sufism

The presentation by Alexandre Papas (CNRS) entitled « Muslim Shrines and saint veneration among the Salar », focused on a Muslim minority of North-western China who speaks an Oghuz Turkic language with loanwords from Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongolian. Migrated from Central Asia to China during the fourteenth century under the Ming dynasty, the Salar now live in Qinghai and Gansu mainly (more precisely in Hualong Hui Autonomous County, Xunhua Salar Autonomous County, and Jishishan Bonan, Dongxiang and Salar Autonomous County). The Salar are Hanafi Sunnis who were (and still are) strongly influenced by Sufism. This affiliation explains both the spread of Sufi lineages (silsila) within the Salar minority and the significance of Muslim shrines as well as the veneration of saints buried in these mausoleums (Persian gumbad; Salar gonbt; Chinese gongbei), since saints are most often Sufi spiritual leaders, and pious visits (ziyarat) to their shrines a recommended devotional practice.

Through materials such as steles, photographs and relics, Alexandre Papas explored recent developments in the religious practices, which sheds light on the techniques du croire (styles of faith). Scholars in this field postulate that believing and knowing are also material operations which depend on technical arrangements and that the same techniques for transmitting belief can be used to transmit knowledge (Luca et al. 2019: introduction). Papas’s presentation was followed by Thierry Zarcone (CNRS/GSRL) who traced the history of Sufism, based on personal observations and data collected through several years fieldwork carried out in Xinjiang at the crossroads of several mystical currents. While the Central Asian influence is well documented, the South Asian, and more specifically Indian, influence is less known. Through archival and field materials collected in southern Xinjiang, Zarcone discussed the presence of the Chistiyya brotherhood and its legacy on contemporary Sufi practices.

Islams and Politics

Dru Gladney (Pomona College, USA) presented the different policies applied to three Chinese ethnic groups categorized as Muslim: the Hui, the Uyghurs and the Kazakhs. Through a long-term analysis and various fieldwork carried out across many Chinese regions, Gladney proposed a spectrum of political postures, fluctuating between “separatism” and “synthesis”. Depending on the group in question and their potential assimilation into Chinese society, Dru Gladney analyses the sinicization in progress, the techniques of which differ according to the religious imaginary that is attached to them: the Hui, who are more closely integrated into the Chinese environment, as distinct from the Uyghurs, who are less integrated into Chinese culture and politics.

Pascale Bugnon (University of Geneva/Confucius Institute) presented the first results of her doctoral research on “Muslim cultural heritage”, which focuses on the influence of heritage on religious practices. Framed by three case studies, she explored the differentiated heritage practices between the sites of Guangzhou, Quanzhou and Yangzhou, articulated according to temporalities, stakes and uses responding to extremely localized political contingencies while being anchored in a national process of “sinicization of religion”.
Finally, Rémi Castets (Bordeaux Montaigne University) presented a paper entitled “Reformist Islam among the Uyghurs: syncretisms between jadidism and Muslim reformism”. In his presentation, Castets focused on Jadidism, a revivalist movement that took place among the Turkish peoples between 1890 and 1945 and some local personalities who participated in promoting a new vision of Muslim society, based on education, hygiene, morality and religiosity. He showed how this movement emancipated itself from the original Tatar controlled environment in order to respond to local problems and to develop the national feeling of the local Turkish-speaking populations within the framework of the struggle for decolonisation. A nationalist scene gradually emerged that transcended the old rivalries between oases and Sufi sects and defended the decolonisation of Xinjiang within the framework of a province-wide Panturkist project.

**Islamic Reconfigurations**

Ma Qiang (Shaanxi Normal University) presented a contribution entitled “Conversion to Islam in China: Former Fieldwork Research and New Observation”. Through the analysis of the phenomenon of conversion, a theme little covered in academic research, Ma Qiang draws up a typology of the different motivations for this phenomenon in China, divided into seven categories. Following up the social life of newly converted Muslims, in terms of acquiring Islamic knowledge and conducting religious rituals in particular, he examined the transformation of cultural consciousness and religious practices when transferred from original social groups to the Muslim community. Compared to a conventional understanding that conversion happens in the traditional Muslim concentrated locations, Ma argued that it frequently happens in coastal cities and metropolis where less ethnic imprint and stereotype exist. The inclusive, pluralistic and modern urban culture actually gives the converts freer choice and opportunities to practice Islamic culture. The different context from which the converts accept and acculturate Islam also make sense with regards to their ethnic identity, factional adherence, and cultural inclination.

Ahmed Ali Shah Syed (Shaanxi Normal University) presented the initial results of his doctoral research on Pakistani Muslim migrants in southeastern China, focusing on two specific fields, in Guangzhou city and Keqiao district of Shaoxing city (Zhejiang Province). Despite the difficulties in obtaining quantitative data about Pakistanis in the region, mainly because the majority of Pakistanis tend not to register with their consulate, Ahamad Ali Shah Syed provided an overview of the situation of Pakistanis migrants in China. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, Syed discussed ethnic groups structure, sectarian affiliations, occupations, and networking aspects. He also described the lifestyle of Pakistani migrants in the two above mentioned cities with regard to family, friendship, ethnic, religious, and social networks as well as ethnic, religious, and common public spaces.

Leila Chérif-Chebbi (independent researcher) discussed the reformist movement Yihewani (伊赫瓦尼) in a talk entitled “The Yihewani Movement (Ikhwan) – an example of plasticity of the diversity or ‘sinisation’ of Islam in China?”. The Yihewani movement (from the Arabic *Ikhwan* “brothers), born in the late 19th century, is one of the main religious groups of Islam in China but to this day it remains relatively unknown and unclassifiable. Although its religious doctrine, inspired from Wahhabism adheres to the dominant Hanafi *madhab*, its territorial implementation
merged with the local Islamic cultures, and reflects its startling plasticity. Chérif-Chebbi discussed whether this movement and its localized characteristics can be considered as the result of the “sinization” of Islam or as the reflection of the dynamism and the diversity of Islam in China. Clearly, the Yihewani’s large adaptability on social and political grounds enabled it, although it was in its early days very local and it stepped aside from the dominant Han society Islamic movement, a movement acting to promote Chinese Muslims’ integration into the modern Chinese society (primarily by the way of developing Muslims’ education). In return, it benefited from the support of the nationalist authorities, and consequently it worked with them, mainly with the Northwestern Ma warlords’ families, and with the the Chinese Communist leaders, particularly through the Islamic Association of China. Today, its plasticity leads some of its main intellectuals and officials to voice their support to the “sinization of Islam”. More than an effect of “sinization”, which could lead to different interpretations, one can see in this exemplary success of the Yihewani movement the reflection of Chinese Islam dynamics and diversity.

**Redefining Ethnicity and Belonging**

Fan Ke’s (Nanjing University) presentation focused on categorical plasticity by analysing the multiple ethnic configurations of Hui Muslims in the cities of Quanzhou and Nanjing. By comparing the practices implemented in these two localities, Fan Ke demonstrated that the ethnic category of “Hui” is highly politicised and adapts to extremely localised issues. Through a discussion of several case studies, for instance halal trade in Nanjing, Fan shows the ‘rediscovery of Muslim roots’ by these local groups does not involve, or hardly involves, the practice of Islam but is rather oriented towards social and economic issues.

Léo Maillet (University of Geneva/EHESS) presented the first results of his doctoral research, focusing on urban change, heritage designation and the production of globalized touristic sites in the context of a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood of Xi’an city known as the Hui quarter. Following a transdisciplinary approach based on the analysis of urban transformations and public advertisement, Léo Maillet proposed a preliminary analysis of the evolution of trading and belonging dynamics in recent years, emphasizing the study of “social life of dough”, especially through bread (*nan*) and noodles (*mian*).

Finally, Liu Zhiyang (Sun Yat-sen University), presented the Muslim community in Lhasa (Tibet), which is composed of two distinct groups: one is Chinese-speaking Muslims, that is, the Hui (Chinese Muslims, *khui rigs*), coming mainly from Qinghai and Gansu provinces and belonging to the “floating population” category. During the Tongzhi period of Qing Dynasty (1862-1873), they fled to Lhasa to avoid the warfare with Han and they became part of the Tibetan Chinese. The other group is the Tibetan-speaking Muslims, also known as the Kachee, who mainly live in the Barkhor area in the old city of Lhasa. Some of them moved into Lhasa from Kashmir, Ladakh and Nepal in the 14th and 15th centuries. Despite being Muslim, this group is officially recognized as Tibetans by the Chinese government, unlike the Hui Muslim nationality, revealing the malleability of ethnic categorisation and issues relating to the religious domain.

Overall, this conference on Islamic pluralism and Muslim diversity provided a vivid picture of
the fluid and shifting boundaries that affect both religious belief and ethnic identity. Through
detailed case studies, the presentations demonstrated the heterogeneous nature and diversity of
categories of « Muslims, » which do not constitute a single, unified, undifferentiated religious
solidarity or a monolithic sense of identity. While the motif of « Islam » suggests a unity of
belief and identity within the Islamic Ummah, its localised reception and practice gives rise to
diverse expressions of identity, always defined and redefined in dialogue with one another.

This contribution was reviewed by Dru C. Gladney

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