Reflecting on Muslim heritage monuments: the case of Sa'ad ibn Waqqas' mausoleum in Guangzhou

BUGNON, Pascale

Abstract

Since the beginning of the 1960s, cultural heritage has become a crucial issue in Chinese political rhetoric, recognizing both the dynastic and historical sites as well as the “culture ethnic minorities”. This process led to the emergence of the protection of some Muslims shrines. Previously used as places for “popular religion” and often labelled as “illegal” (非法宗教) or “superstitious” (迷信) practices by the Chinese authorities, these places are being reclaimed through patrimonialization, resulting in many structural and ideological changes. How this new discourse about religious monuments, in particular about Islamic one, emerged in China? For what purposes? My discussion will be grounded in an ethnographic case study from south China: the mausoleum of Sa'ad ibn Waqqas in Guangzhou (Guangdong Province), which is seen as the first entry point of Islam in China during the 7th century. This site has been recognized and classified as national cultural heritage site in 2013, and is inscribed on the tentative list of the UNESCO as part of the Maritime Silk Routes since 2012. Through these […]

Reference

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Reflecting on Muslim Heritage Monuments: The Case of Sa’ad ibn Waqqas’ Mausoleum in Guangzhou

Abstract

Since the beginning of the 1960s, cultural heritage has become a crucial issue in Chinese political rhetoric, recognizing both the dynastic and historical sites as well as the “culture ethnic minorities”. This process led to the emergence of the protection of some Muslims shrines. Previously used as places for “popular religion” and often labelled as “illegal” (非法宗教) or “superstitious” (迷信) practices by the Chinese authorities, these places are being reclaimed through patrimonialization, resulting in many structural and ideological changes. How this new discourse about religious monuments, in particular about Islamic one, emerged in China? For what purposes? My discussion will be grounded in an ethnographic case study from south China: the mausoleum of Sa’ad ibn Waaqas in Guangzhou (Guangdong Province), which is seen as the first entry point of Islam in China during the 7th century. This site has been recognized and classified as national cultural heritage site in 2013, and is inscribed on the tentative list of the UNESCO as part of the Maritime Silk Routes since 2012. Through these multilayered heritage processes, I will explore how religious heritage has emerged and has been framed and managed through local, national and international policies.

Introduction

Cultural heritage has become a crucial issue in Chinese political rhetoric since the beginning of the 1960s. Initially, the function of this discourse was essentially centered around the socialist and revolutionary ideology, but a paradigmatic shift has occurred since the late 1980s, where the culture of ethnic minorities (少数民族) was considered 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, among which are a specific category of buildings: “ancient tombs” (古墓葬). In the midst of these burials, various historical or legendary figures gained the status of heroes of the nation through an institutionalized sanctification. Previously used as places for “popular religion” and often labelled as “illegal” (非法宗教) or “superstitious” (迷信) practices by the Chinese authorities, these places are being reclaimed through patrimonialization, resulting in many structural and ideological changes. What domestic and international legal frameworks have been developed to ensure the protection of historical monuments? How have ancient sites been managed and sustained by modern institutions?
Launched in October 2015, this doctoral research is a four-year project, which explores the way in which different agents appropriate and use heritage to compete in specific power scenarios. Indeed, heritage discourses and practices are approached as defining specific political arenas within which power relations are reconfigured. In order to analyse this mechanism, this research will combine, on the one hand, in a discourse analysis of the policies, regulations and decrees promulgated by the Chinese authorities on cultural heritage and religion. On the other hand, this paper will focus on one ethnography, one in Guangzhou (Guangdong Province) and the other in Quanzhou (Fujian Province), where three important Muslim tombs have been recognized and classified as national cultural heritage sites. These two analytical approaches will provide an analysis of the constructed heritage as being produced, identified and valued within specific logic and value systems. Indeed, cultural heritage organizes different fields of forces and dynamics, where political actors, stakeholders and as well as commoners are themselves engaged in numerous arenas and discourses to shape those sites, which are continually under negotiations. This issue will highlight the changes between state, society and religion.

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on a case study in Guangzhou, that is the tomb of the “Ancient Islamic Savant” which is supposed to be the grave Sa’ad ibn Waqqas (595-674), one of the most illustrious companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Some historical records indicate that he was the maternal uncle of Muhammad. He made several diplomatic visits to China (616 and 628) and was one of the first to have introduced Islam into China. After his death in 629, the believers buried him and built a tomb. As a result, the site is considered the most famous Muslim site in China, approaching the sacredness of Mecca. Since 2013, the site is inscribed as a national cultural relics of China and has become a tourist highlight in Guangzhou. And since 2012, it is inscribed on the tentative list of the UNESCO.

The national heritage inscription was preceded by the publication of the “Protection Plan of the Tomb of the Ancient Islamic Savant” (广东省文物保护单位清真先贤古墓保护规划) (hereafter “Protection Plan”) in 2009 by the Provincial Department of Culture of Guangdong. I am interested here in the process by which, in recent decades, certain elements of Muslim history identified as “national heritage”, have acquired a specific status and often enjoyed special symbolic power. Indeed, how this new discourse about religious monuments, in particular about Islamic one, emerged in China? For what purposes? Through the analysis of this document and the discourses surrounding the Muslim heritage, it is possible to understand the socio-political stakes of this cultural revalorization and how history can be activated today in China, especially through some methods of enunciating and practicing cultural heritage.

Cultural Heritage Process in China

Cultural heritage and its processes have been developed in China recently: it was in 1961 that the People's Republic of China put in place the first piece of legislation to safeguard historical monuments, accompanied by a list of 180 heritage sites, known as “national cultural relics” (文物保护单位). This initial decree will be followed by the promulgation of six other

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1 BAO Yanzhong 保延忠, 2008, “A rare old photograph of the original tomb of Ancient Islamic Savant in Guangzhou” [弥足珍贵的广州清真先贤古墓原貌老照片], in : Literature and History, n° 2, pp. 92-100 p. 95.
2 HAN Weilong 韩维龙 and YI Xibing 易西兵, 2017, Historical Sites in Guangzhou on the Maritime Silk Road [海上丝绸之路广州史迹], Guangzhou, Guangzhou chubanshe, p. 178.
3 The inscription was renewed in 2016, but the process is still going on.

The legal apparatus that protects monuments and vestiges developed gradually from the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 but remained dependent on contemporary historical facts, including the Cultural Revolution. Initially, a large place was given to the archaeological remains - especially ancient and dynastic China - and to the revolutionary monuments that mobilize the nationalist sentiments of the population. However, the accession of Deng Xiaoping to the post of Prime Minister in July 1977 permanently changed the place given to cultural heritage, where revolutionary ideology and class struggle were gradually replaced by a nationalist perspective\(^6\).

Table 1: Evolution of the number of Cultural Heritage’s sites at national level (1961-2013)

![Graph showing the evolution of Cultural Heritage sites from 1961 to 2013](image)

180 62 258 250 518 1080 1943

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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Extending the heritage field

The Reform and Opening up policy promoted by Deng Xiaoping have led to changes in the field of culture which now incorporate “traditional folk cultures of national minorities”. Indeed, at the beginning of the eighties, the State recognized the existence of national particularities\(^7\) by promulgating various regulations and organizing conferences on ethnic...


minorities. In addition to this dimension, there is growing interest in cultural tourism: during the period 1978-1996, local authorities are aware of the possible financial benefits linked to the development of sites and the economic repercussions of development tourism\(^8\). Heritage investment becomes an unavoidable process made visible by the creation of new patrimonial categories in China (historical and cultural cities, national parks, special tourist areas, intangible cultural heritage, etc.) and by the desire to give an international dimension to the protection of the Chinese heritage: membership of UNESCO in 1985, the ICOMOS Charter in 2000 and finally the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003. In this general process of patrimonial recognition, the place of Islam occupies an interesting place, where some mosques and Muslim tombs have been valued as national relics, and raises several questions about religious practices, memory and historiography.

Table 2: Distribution of Muslim heritage by provinces and municipalities

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Table 3: Evolution of Muslim sites included on the national heritage list (1961-2013)

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Islam in China

According to the data of the Chinese national census in 2000, the Muslim population of the country is around 20 million including such ten Muslim nationalities as Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Donxiang, Kirghiz, Salar, Tadjik, Uzbek, Boa’an, and Tatar, mainly distributed 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 across Central Asia by what was to become known as the Silk Route and by sea into south-eastern China. Some of these traders settled in the port cities of the south-eastern coast, in particular Guangzhou, Quanzhou and Changzhou which all became important commercial centers. According to tradition, the first Islamic mission to China arrived in 627 CE and was led by the Prophet’s uncle, who supposedly made his way from the 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, “amongst the disciples of Mohammed, there were four great sages. In the Wude reign of the Tang dynasty (618-626), they came to China to propagate the teaching. The first sage stayed in Guangzhou, the second in Yangzhou, and the third and fourth in Quanzhou where they passed away and were buried”. Accurate or not, it is true that the oldest Chinese Islamic communities, mosques, and cemeteries are in China’s southeastern port cities. Among a large spectrum of remaining Islamic sites, two are particularly important: they are the tomb of “Tomb of Ancient Islamic Savant” (先贤古墓) located in Guangzhou and the “Islamic tombs” (伊斯兰教圣墓) in Quanzhou.

The Tomb of Ancient Islamic Savant

The entire site covers a total area of 27,000 square meters and is divided into two scopes of protection. The yellow part is the general area (see figure 2), which includes provincial-level protection heritage, and the red part, which is the national-level protected area and includes the tomb of Sa’ab ibn Waqqas. In addition to this important relic, there are 332 historical Muslims tombs, as well as archways, pavilions, steles and other cultural relics.

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10 See LESLIE Donald, 1984, Islam in traditional China, Canberra, Canberra College of Advanced Education, pp. 74-75.
11 The site in Yangzhou is special because currently, there is no trace of the arrival of one of the companions of the Prophet.
From the first photographs we have of the site - dated from the end of the Qing Dynasty - we note that the site has evolved greatly.
Successive renovations have been done, however, these renovations are the result of extremely recent developments. A brief overview of the various renovations and restorations is necessary to understand the political and economic mechanisms underlying the heritage process.

**Historical Protection Background**

Although the site is considered as a cultural heritage site since 2013, the history of its protection is rather succinct: It is said that the site has been renovated several times between the 48th year of Chaolong (1779) until 1979\(^\text{12}\) but the inscriptions corresponding to the Tang and the Ming dynasties have not been found, only the inscriptions of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) year of Qing Jiaqing (1815), the 25\(^{\text{th}}\) year of Daoguan (1849), and the 23\(^{\text{rd}}\) year of the Republic of China (1934) were recorded. In July 1962, the Guangdong Provincial Government announced that it

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\(^{12}\) MA Jianzhao 马建钊 et ZHANG Shuhui 张淑晖, 2015, *Southern China. A collection of historical and literary materials on Hui groups and religious sites* [中国南方．回族团体与宗教场所文史资料辑要], Guangzhou, Guangdong renmin chubanshe, p.18.
was a provincial-level cultural relics protection unit. During the Cultural Revolution, the ancient tombs in the site were destroyed to some extent and some of the inscriptions as well. It was not until 1985 that the People’s government of Guangdong Province reapproved the publication of the ancient tomb of the Islamic Savant as a cultural relics protection unit of Guangdong province. Between the 1980s and the end of the 1990s, the site was absolutely not at the center of government concerns. As proof, the original site was even cut off from part of its land in 1988 and 1998 for the construction of the road to the north gate and a parking to the south gate. In addition, it was not until 1999 that the site obtained a religious recognition: the Office of Ethnic and religious Affairs 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. After the reform and opening up to 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 respect to the tomb. Indeed, it was not until the 2000s that the site became a concern for the government, investing in a broad process of heritage revaluation and urban development. First of all, in 2010, the Provincial government approved the construction of the worship hall on the site in order to alleviate the shortage of Muslim worship facilities in Guangzhou City. Secondly, the same institution approved the “Protection Plan” which initiated a wide heritage development on the site: In October 2012, the ancient tomb was recognized as an important part of the Guangzhou historical site of the Maritime Silk Road and it was listed by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage as the “Tentative List Chinese World Cultural Heritage”. And finally, in March 2013, the tomb was announced as a key national cultural protection unit. Even if some Chinese scholars often write that “the government department repeatedly allocated special funds to repair the cemetery”, a quick look at the historical protection background reveals that this process is quite new. In fact, these various renovations are the result of rough debates whose results appeared only a few years ago. Two texts are particularly revealing of these discussions which led to a reconsideration of the site and the problems which affected it. The first text is the “Proposal on Strengthening the Protection Planning and the Construction of Temples and Churches in my city”, published by the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference Guangzhou Committee on August 31, 2008. In this lampoon, the author criticizes the lack of protection of religious cultural heritage and the lack of facilities for believers in Guangzhou. The same critic appears in the articles of the actual president of the Islamic Association of Guangzhou, Wang Wenjie, who wrote “The Construction of the

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14 HAN and YI, op. cit., p. 179.
15 MA and ZHANG, op. cit., p. 18.
16 Ibid., p. 18.
17 Ibid., p. 18.
18 Guangzhou Baiyun Cultural Relics Protection Engineering Co., Ltd., Guangzhou Han Rui heritage Design Research Center, 2009, “Conservation Planning for the Tomb of Ancient Islamic Savant, a Cultural Relics Protection Unit in Guangdong Province” [广东省文物保护单位清真先贤古墓保护规划], Guangzhou, internal publication.
Guangzhou Islamic Savant Mosque” in 2011\(^1\), in which he relates the problems, the discussions and the negotiations carried out to obtain the approval of the construction of the mosque. Indeed, before the 2000s, the situation of Islam, and its revaluation, was not a concern of the government. The files associated with it were systematically rejected. However, external factors compelled the local authorities to be concerned about this site: the first is the organization of the Asian Games by the city of Guangzhou in 2010, and the second, is the importance of the Silk Road in political discourses. These two factors led us to look at the site from another angle and to promulgate a specific “Protection Plan”, published in 2009 by the provincial department.

**« Protection plan of the tomb of the Ancient Islamic Savant »**

This protection plan is the first and unique planning that has been done on this site. The main contents of this plan are the meaning of the site, maps and drawing executed by different departments, and some explanations about it. The protection plan has been planned over a period of 20 years, from 2009 to 2029, divided into three parts:

**Figure 5: Implementation stages:**

1. 2009-2011 (in green): During this period, the park has been renovated and the new worship hall has been constructed.
2. 2012-2017 (in yellow): The north and the south entrances have been finished and the cultural relics protection has been implemented.
3. 2018-2029 (in blue): Gradually, the historical pattern of the site will be restored, the relevant regulations on the cultural relics protection implemented and the surrounding environment further optimized\(^2\).

Beside the implementation stages, the plan also reveals the “heritage justifications” of the inscription of the tomb on the national cultural heritage. The very first value explains is the historical value: “the site has gradually developed into a holy place for Islam, an important testimony of the Maritime Silk Road and an important historical material for studying the historical and culture of Islam in Guangzhou”\(^3\). According to this document, Sa’ad ibn Waqqas bought Islamic culture in China and symbolizes the friendship between Chinese people and those from the Arab world\(^4\). In addition, there are other values put forward. The first one is the social values: According to the Protection Plan, the Ancient tomb of the Islamic Savant is an important place of worship for Islam in Guangzhou, enjoying a high status among Muslims locally but also internationally\(^5\). Thereby, it’s a connection space for Islamic communities and...

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\(^3\) Ibid., p. 2.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 5.

\(^5\) Ibid., p.3.
has a strong practical function\textsuperscript{26}. Secondly, the emotional and aesthetic values: People are amazed of the ancient architecture of the Islamic Savant’s grave, which represents a strong Muslim identity marker. In addition, this site is the core landmark of Guangzhou Islamic culture and a spiritual support for a majority of Muslims religious beliefs\textsuperscript{27}. It’s also a unique artistic and humanistic environment which could cultivate the public interest of accepting diversified aesthetics\textsuperscript{28}. Finally, the scientific values: Here, this value refers specifically to that of the history of science and history of technology, mainly in the following aspects: layout, styling and structural design, which integrate architecture, environment and traditional Islamic culture\textsuperscript{29}.

**Major Problems**

This plan aims to implement the ideology of the cultural relics work policy of “protect and rescue first, use rationally, and strengthen the management” \textsuperscript{30} in order to seek the “organic connection and harmonious relationship between heritage protection and urban development, and promote the common development of social ethnic harmony and heritage protection”\textsuperscript{31}. According to the “Protection plan”, the damages caused by natural and historical reasons are widespread. The overall park is chaotic and roads and environmental governance have not been unified and scientifically planned. The existing management institutions need to be improved, and the cultural relics protection technology is lacking. Indeed, the existing infrastructure is rudimentary and seriously affects the image of the cemetery. So, the infrastructure needs to be improved and managed by a comprehensive master plan. The main problems listed in the “Protection plan” are\textsuperscript{32}:

- The tombstones, arches and a part of the ancient building have been damaged and need to be repaired and protected (especially the Three Loyals’ pavilion). The maintenance and repair of cultural relics should be included in the daily maintenance plan, and necessary rescue measures should be taken in time for potential safety hazards;
- Due to the lack of unified planning and design, the current environment of the park is rather chaotic, which is inconsistent with the status of the ancient cemetery;
- The cemetery received foreign tombs, which is inconsistent with the historical pattern of the tomb of the Ancient Islamic Savant;
- Lack of infrastructure and facilities, such as toilets and cleaning rooms affect the solemn atmosphere of the park. In addition, it exists in a serious shortage of places for religious activities;

The will to solve the problems raised in this plan is related to two events: the Asian Games and the importance of the discourse on the Maritime Silk Road. In the case of the first, which occurred in Guangzhou in 2010, the “Protection Plan” refers specifically that “the venue for religious activities is seriously inadequate and cannot meet the needs during the Asian Games”\textsuperscript{33}. Indeed, “athletes and spectators from Asian Muslim countries will come to Guangzhou, and the demand for worship at the Ancient Islamic Savant’s tomb will increase

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid., p. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p.1.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., pp. 3-5.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 5.
\end{itemize}
dramatically. In order to meet the needs and strengthen the religious function, it is necessary to add a new place of worship and at the same time develop necessary facilities"\(^{34}\). In this perspective, the “Protection Plan” concludes that “the construction of the worship hall is urgently needed”\(^{35}\). The site also became an important component of the rhetoric around the “Maritime Silk Road” in China, which is part of the historical framework of Eurasian relations. The investment and reassessment of the Silk Road, as a cultural link of the Eurasian space, began with the UNESCO Silk Road project in the late 1980s in Quanzhou and the integration of several central Asian sites into the UNESCO World Heritage List. The tomb of the Ancient Islamic Savant is therefore considered as evidence of the transmission between the “Arabs” and the Muslim culture in Southern coastal cities of China, which “was an important maritime passage in history, connecting both east and the west, a road promoting dialogue between the material and spiritual civilization of humanity. Its formation and development constitute an important part of the history of the world”\(^{36}\). Through the cultural heritage process, this site has become one basis by which the Chinese government recognizes the important contribution of Muslims to the history of China. However, this revaluation takes place through the silence of a particular aspect: that of religion.

**The Absence of Legislation on Religious Heritage**

In the “Protection Plan”, the place of religion is not legible in cultural heritage legislation. This lack of a real legal framework is explained in particular by the fact that the development remains in the shadow of the administration of historical monuments. The only mentions relating to the religious practices are listed under the term “tradition” and the need to protect the site: “The Ancient Tomb of the Islamic Savant is a public space for the gathering and exchange of Muslims in Guangzhou, and is also an important material environment for the Islamic culture of Guangzhou”\(^{37}\). In this perspective, “the protection of traditional religious culture should correctly be handled with the relationship between protection, development, and utilization”\(^{38}\). In this document, one can easily see that religion is not the center of attention but instead, the focalization is on the protection of cultural heritage. Indeed, religious issues are dealt with by other departments (such as the Office of Religions and Minorities) and have no or very little contact with the Department of Culture. Religious sites, such as the tomb of the Ancient Islamic Savant, become hybrid sites, where spiritual and cultural motifs are overlapped or sometimes opposed, and from which serious conflicts may arise.

**Conclusion: Historic Monuments as Heritage Diplomacy Sites**

Through the recent heritage developments surrounding the tomb, we have seen that this phenomenon has become a government concern through two specific events: the Asian games and the discourse around the Maritime Silk Road. Prior to these, the heritage protection was practically absent. As proposed by Tim Winter\(^{39}\), the new patrimonial concern must be analyzed through the lens of heritage diplomacy. Heritage diplomacy can broadly be defined as “a set of

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\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 11.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 11.
\(^{36}\) HAN and YI, *op. cit.*, p. 197.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 8.
\(^{38}\) Ibid., p. 8.
processes whereby cultural and natural pasts shared between and across nations become subject to exchanges, collaborations and forms of cooperative governance". In this sense, the tomb and the history of its protection must be analyzed from this angle: thus, we see that the tomb serves as an anchor point in diplomatic relations with the Muslim countries. Many meetings are organized between the Islamic Association of Guangzhou, which is responsible for the management of the tomb, and various Muslim delegations, which uses the site as a showcase of Islam and Muslims in Guangzhou.

Figure 6: Pictures of Muslim delegations in Guangzhou

Iranian delegation with Wang Wenjie, the actual president of the Islamic Association of Guangzhou

Qatari delegation with Wang Wenjie

Sources: Guangdong Islamic Association, 2017, back page
Guangzhou Islamic Association, 2016, p.40

Thus, “the material past and its conservation have been a key mediator of the relations between nations, their governments and their people”41, which largely explains the heritage processes of religious sites in China today.

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40 Ibid., p. 1007.
41 Ibid., p. 1012.
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