



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Homeland, magnet, and refuge: Mecca in the travels and imaginaries of Chinese Muslims

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Abstract

Mecca is often conceptualized as a destination for the *hajj* or a source of leverage for both western and Ottoman imperial states, and in the twentieth century, for Saudi national foreign policy and Islamist movements. While building on such transnational angles, this article views the city as a convergence point for diaspora populations, an intermediary site that has received and redirected the mobilities of sojourners, refugees, and exiles from different parts of Asia throughout the manifold turnovers of the twentieth century. The article focuses on a community of first- to third-generation settlers in the Hejaz who trace their other homes to different places in China proper. Using archival documents, travelogues, and ethnographic interviews, the article argues that the routes to Mecca, coupled with imaginaries of the city as a home place for Muslims worldwide, served as a rare constant orienting force that sustained two-directional mobilities of Chinese Muslim diasporas through the wars and revolutions of modern times.

Keywords: Mecca; Islam and China; Inter-Asia; Saudi Arabia

Introduction

Aisha is a long-time resident of Ta'if, a mountainous town of 700,000 people about an hour drive east of Mecca. In a country that classifies her family as perpetual foreigners despite years of residence, living in physical proximity to Mecca has provided a source of comfort, a sense of spiritual belonging that makes Aisha and her family feel less alien. Aisha first came to Saudi Arabia in 1990, accompanied by Muhammad, now her husband, whose parents had used the yearly Islamic pilgrimage (*hajj*) to flee from anti-rightist campaigns in Gansu and Tibet in the 1950s. Now in 2017, Aisha was returning to her hometown in Sichuan, China for the first time in nearly three decades. Aisha's trip stood in stark contrast to those of Muhammad, born and raised in Ta'if, who since the 1990s had gone annually to China, visiting Gansu, Tibet, Yunnan, and Guangdong. The opening up of mainland China in the 1980s let him discover old homes and extended relatives, meet and marry Aisha, and start a tea business in Ta'if and Jeddah. As Aisha landed in the Guangzhou International Airport, heat and humid air rushed to face her.

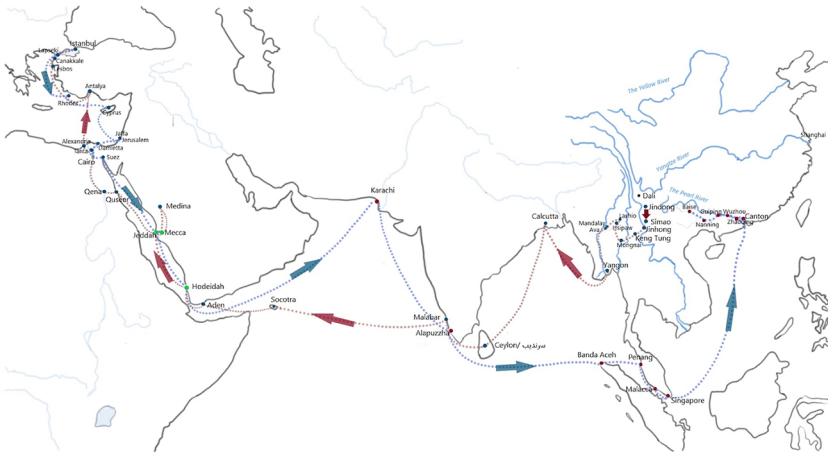


Figure 1. Map of Ma Dexin's pilgrimage travels (1841–1848). Can the two figure be inserted closer to the main text references?

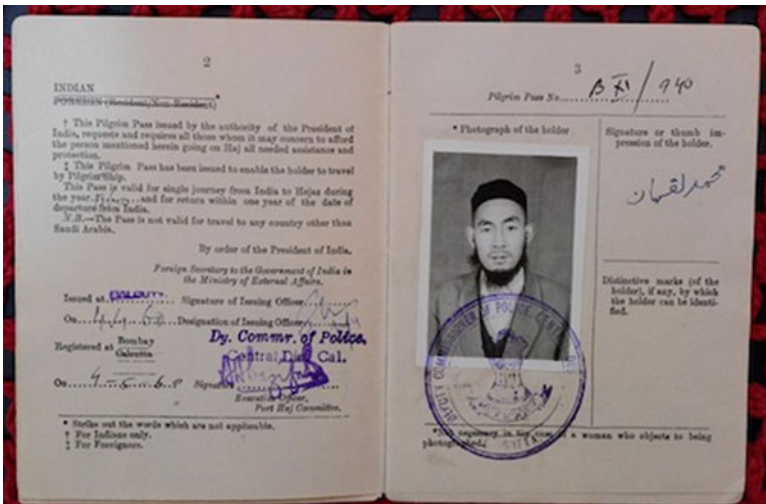


Figure 2. Pilgrim pass of Loqmān issued in Bombay, 1960. Loqmān family archives

Beneath the experiences of Aisha’s family are layers of multi-directional, cross-regional mobility that have unfolded through generations and changed over time. If the *hajj* can be understood, in the words of Lale Can, as an ‘open-ended migration’,¹ Mecca offers a lens and framework for unearthing historic and contemporary migratory flows mediated by the pilgrimage. From the vantage point of Chinese Muslims, Mecca appears as an intermediary site that regulates inter-Asian migrations and exiles,

¹Lale Can, *Spiritual subjects: Central Asian pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the end of empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), pp. 26.

a repertoire that enables identifications with dual homes, and a springboard for the formation of diaspora communities in the Hejaz that sometimes recreate connections with distant home places.² Disaggregating the presence of Chinese Muslim communities in Mecca and tracing their mobility over the past century leads us to recognize the recurrent travels, circulations of donations that build congregational institutions, and formations of familial and other forms of interpersonal relations that converge in the city. Such networks have re-routed themselves and reassembled through points of rupture, occasionally providing states with ready-made channels of informal diplomacy. Using Mecca as a lens lets us take Islam and the Muslim communities in mainland China out of their interlocked relations with the Chinese nation-states as minority ethnicities and widen their social spaces through a focus on conceptual and physical mobilities.

This paper uses a combination of textual sources—archives, memoirs, travelogues, and periodicals—and oral interviews with living members of communities. I dissect converging circulations of persons and donations that were re-routed in Mecca across time. In doing so, it echoes Ildikó Bellér-Hann's stress on the importance of the "cultural stuff" circumscribed by ethnic boundaries,³ beyond the focus on processes of ethnic boundary-making and markers of differentiation. In the contemporary People's Republic of China, Muslims have been categorized into ten different minority ethnicities, the largest being the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs and Chinese-speaking Hui. Certainly, one needs to bear in mind that there are linguistic, territorial, and historical distinctions that form the bases of such categorizations and that the classification regime has exercised potency over the past seven decades. The minority ethnicity (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) framework, however, also places analytical and geographic limitations on recognizing the long-standing centrality of trans-regional social networks and spatial conceptions in shaping Chinese Muslim identities and livelihoods. Mecca's outside-in vantage point renders these networks and conceptions visible and incorporates into Sino-Islamic cartographies diaspora communities who possess bases outside the territorial PRC state, where minority paradigm as defined within the PRC loses applicability.

Chinese Muslim mobilities, in turn, open a space to interrogate and challenge the distinctions between 'pilgrim' and labour 'migrant' that hardened in the late 1980s in Saudi policy and public discourses.⁴ Mecca tends to be left out of discussions on migrations to Gulf cities and states such as Dubai and Kuwait, where important scholarship has revealed structural forces that, since the 1970s, mean that labourers, sojourners, and long-time settlers exist as internal outsiders or in limbo statuses both politically and culturally.⁵ While mindful of these pressures, a cross-chronological view of a diaspora community in the Hejaz reveals the sojourns, exiles, and settlements

²On conceptualizing and uncovering the vibrant dynamics of 'Inter-Asia' as a space, past and present, Engseong Ho, 'Inter-Asian concepts for mobile societies', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 76, no. 4, 2017, pp. 907–928.

³Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *Community matters in Xinjiang, 1880–1949: Towards a historical anthropology of the Uyghur* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 2.

⁴Helene Thiolllet and Laure Assaf, 'Cosmopolitanism in exclusionary contexts', *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1–16, here 6.

⁵The list, by no means comprehensive, includes Noora Lori, *Offshore citizens: Permanent temporary status in the Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Neha Vora, *Impossible citizens: Dubai's Indian diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Anh Nga Longva, *Walls built on sand: Migration, exclusion,*

in the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula as a historical and recurrent phenomenon accompanied by a sense of return to the universally shared homeland. In this sense, Mecca represents a unique collection of pilgrimage-migrant ‘mobility assemblages’, each shaped by a history of mutually interactive contingent trans-regional circulations.⁶

I use the term Chinese Muslims loosely to refer to populations who, at different moments, have forged narratives harkening back to the past to present themselves as belonging to both Chinese and Islamic spheres. This should not be taken to mean that the categories of China and Islam are fixed and incongruent, but that over generations, diasporas and their descendants straddling Chinese political territories and Muslim-majority societies have made narrative investments, often expressed in collective genealogical forms, that embed themselves in local societies while maintaining conceptual connections with distant home places. Such religious and borderland populations expand the scope of what Shelly Chan terms ‘diaspora time’ in studies of Chinese diasporas—or non-linear temporalities reflected in the lives of emigrant individuals and families—and ‘diaspora moments’, when such temporalities converge with Chinese states’ outreach and global positioning.⁷ Chinese Muslims’ active geographies across Asia have been more expansive than those of sojourners travelling across the South China Seas, and conceptions of home more inclusive and ambiguous than a singular central homeland.⁸

The paper first lays out routes and modes of travel between Mecca and different parts of China from the mid-nineteenth century on and shows them periodically coupling with paths of exile. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Mecca became more reachable by sail, steam, and air, pilgrimage and exile recurrently formed a binding relationship, with a journey to Mecca offering a way to escape political turmoil or loss of power back home. The confluences of pilgrims, scholars, and escapees sustained the small yet concrete structure of the waqf, the endowment institution in Mecca that was established in the inter-war period for pilgrims from different parts of China. The paper’s second section unravels the story of the waqf’s construction, destruction, and reconstruction over a century—a story that epitomizes the formations, ruptures, and re-routings of trans-regional Chinese Muslim networks over the inter-war, Cold War, and post-Cold War periods. The final section reveals bi-directional, contingent movements of Chinese Muslim diaspora communities between the Hejaz

and society in Kuwait (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997); Pardis Mahdavi, *Gridlock: Labor, migration, and human trafficking in Dubai* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁶Xiang Biao and Qiang (Ramadan) Ma, ‘Mobility assemblage and the return of Islam in Southeast China’, in *Asia inside out: Itinerant people*, (eds) Eric Tagliacozzo, Helen F. Siu, and Peter C. Perdue (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), pp. 52–74.

⁷Shelly Chan, *Diaspora’s homeland: Modern China in the age of global migration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). For a valuable discussion on Uyghur (Kashgari) diasporas in Pakistan and the PRC state’s surveillance of and outreach toward them since the 2000s, Alessandro Rippa, *Borderland infrastructures: Trade, development, and control in Western China* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), pp. 177–194.

⁸During the Second World War, the Japanese Empire recognized the potential expansiveness and utility of Sino-Muslim networks and attempted to use them as commercial and diplomatic intermediaries. Kelly Hammond, *China’s Muslims & Japan’s empire: Centering Islam in World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

and mainland China since the 1980s, based on six months of multisite ethnography conducted primarily in 2017.

Travels and exiles

As a trans-regional sacred centre with religious and political importance, Mecca and the *hajj* has been studied from multiple disciplines and geographies. Victor Turner spoke of *communitas*, a communal sense of fellowship that participants in the pilgrimage develop in a state of liminality, ‘in spatial separation from the familiar and habitual’.⁹ Mecca held and holds symbolic and material significance for both the polities that have presided over the Hejaz and the colonial authorities ruling over Muslim-majority societies outside the Arabian Peninsula. The political and commercial interests of the Ottoman, Dutch, Russian, and British empires in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prompted facilitation of and surveillance over the pilgrimage routes across the Indian Ocean and Central Asia.¹⁰ At the same time, routes to and from Mecca offered religious scholars and anti-colonial intellectuals opportunities to forge networks and lineages. While the itineraries of such figures transcended geographic divisions, they utilized and strengthened Meccan communal institutions known as *tekke* or *waqf*, organized around locational identifications—akin to the guild-halls (*huiquan* 會館) established in imperial China and among Chinese diasporas.¹¹ Mecca was also a historic centre for commerce, linked to the Red Sea coasts and the Indian Ocean world through the gateway of Jeddah and to overland caravan trade routes through Damascus.¹² With the advent of the oil economy and the spike in the pilgrimage tourism industry starting in the mid-twentieth century, the city’s rapid urbanization and commercialization at the expense of historical and sacred sites drew criticism from inside and outside the Saudi state.

Less known are the livelihoods and networks of individuals who, after coming to Mecca for various purposes, stayed on in the Hejaz, either voluntarily or by force. Pilgrims from Eurasia and Africa became multi-generation settlers on the coasts of the Red Sea, keeping varying degrees of engagement with the Saudi national society and home places elsewhere. For those known in Saudi Arabia as ‘Bukhārī’ or ‘Turkistānī’, travel to Mecca offered escape from Russian Central Asia and Xinjiang

⁹Victor Turner, ‘The center out there: Pilgrim’s goal’, *History of Religions*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1973, pp. 191–230, here 213.

¹⁰Can, *Spiritual subjects: Central Asian pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the end of empire*; Michael Christopher Low, *Imperial Mecca: Ottoman Arabia and the Indian Ocean Hajj* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Eric Tagliacozzo, *The longest journey: Southeast Asians and the pilgrimage to Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Suraiya Faroqhi, *Pilgrims and sultans: The Hajj under the Ottomans, 1517–1683* (London: Tauris, 1994); Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Umar Ryad (ed.), *The Hajj and Europe in the age of Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

¹¹Francis Bradley, *Forging Islamic power and place: The legacy of Shaykh Dā’ūd Bin ‘Abd Allāh al-Faṭānī in Mecca and Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016); Alexandre Papas and Thierry Zarcone, *Central Asian pilgrims: Hajj routes and pious visits between Central Asia and the Hijaz* (Berlin: Schwarz, 2012); Ahmed Chanfi, *West African ‘ulamā’ and Salafism in Mecca and Medina* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

¹²See, for instance, Ulrike Freitag, *A history of Jeddah: The gate to Mecca in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Suraiya Faroqhi, ‘Red Sea trade and communications as observed by Evliya Çelebi (1671–72)’, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, vol. 5–6, 1991, pp. 87–105.

(East Turkestan) during political turbulence including the Bolshevik Revolution and the incessant wars in Xinjiang in the 1930s and 40s.¹³ In the 1980s, with the opening of mainland China and the Soviet Union, former refugees from Central Asia and their descendants started reconnecting with relatives and religious circles back home.¹⁴ Individuals referred to as 'Faṭānī' or 'Jāwī', on the other hand, were scholars, escapees, and pilgrims who traversed the Indian Ocean between the Arabian Peninsula and the Malay Peninsula/Archipelago between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. For many who identify with the present-day Faṭānī community in the Hejaz, Mecca is a home more familiar than what they see as alien home places in Southeast Asia. The logistical realities of citizenship that deny their political membership and even physical presence, however, complicate the diaspora communities' sense of belonging to Mecca.¹⁵ Furthermore, the informal expressions 'ṭarsh al-baḥr' (vomits of the seas) or 'baqāyā al-ḥajj' (remains of the pilgrimage) denote barriers to sociocultural belonging, in a society that, with urbanization, has come to valorize a settled Arab tribal origin supposedly verifiable by genealogy.¹⁶ Perhaps in response, there is an increasing visibility of Arabic-language popular works of history and media outlets on the Central Asian (Turkistānī) or Southeast Asian (Faṭānī, Barmāwī, Jāwī) populations in Saudi Arabia, often produced by members of the communities.¹⁷

A common theme of stories of sojourn and settlement in the Hejaz, particularly for individuals who either undertook the journey to Mecca from China or whose ancestors did, is exile. In the late nineteenth century, wartime escapees and politically ostracized figures found a haven in Mecca, a point that gets mentioned only in passing in scholarship. Sheikh Mohammed bin Khalifa, a ruler of Bahrain (r. 1849–1869) banished to Bombay by British authorities after his unauthorized war with Qatar, found a temporary refuge in Mecca, reuniting there with his son Sheikh Ebrahim when the son performed the pilgrimage and then stayed for three years. The exiled ruler died in Mecca in 1890.¹⁸ Other exiles established institutions of learning. The founder of the Ṣawlatiyyah School in Mecca was Rahmatullah al-Kairanawi (1818–1891) from Uttar Pradesh in India, who fled the reprisals against the 1857 Indian uprising against Britain.

¹³Rian Thum and Huda Abdul Ghafour Amin Kashgary, 'The Turkistanis of Mecca: Community histories of periphery and center', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2021, pp. 188–207.

¹⁴Bayram Balci, 'Central Asian refugees in Saudi Arabia: Religious evolution and contributing to the reislamization of their motherland', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2007, pp. 12–21.

¹⁵Muhammad Arafat Bin Mohamad, 'Be-longing: Fatanis in Makkah and Jawi' (PhD dissertation, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2013).

¹⁶Freitag, *A history of Jeddah: The gate to Mecca in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, pp. 23–24. Nadav Samin, *Of sand or soil: Genealogy and tribal belonging in Saudi Arabia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁷Examples include Fawziyah 'Abd al-Qādir Islām Turkistānī, *al-Turkistāniyyūn ... man hum?* (Jeddah: Fihrist Maktabat al-Malik Fahd al-Waṭaniyyah, 2015); Murād b. Ibrāhīm Andjānī, *Dirāsah Taḥlīliyyah li-Nazarat Awqāf Bilād Mā Warā' al-Nahr (Turkistān) fī Makkah al-Mukarramah wa-l-Madīnah al-Munawwarah* (Jeddah: Jāmi'at al-Malik 'Abd al-'Azīz, 2010); Fawzī 'Abd al-Ṣamad Fatānī, *Asānīd al-Faṭāniyyīn fī Rihāb al-Balad al-Amīn* (Mecca: Dār Ibrāhīm Muḥammad al-Sa'īdi, 2018); RMC Arkan Channel (*al-Markaz al-Ilāmī al-Rūhinjī*), <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTFIPUC5diYkAtyPd100e4A>, [accessed 22 June 2021]. These historical productions, which diverge from the emphasis on verifiable Arab tribal genealogy prevalent in Central Arabia (*Najd*), have not yet received due attention in western scholarship.

¹⁸Omar AlShehabi, *Contested modernity: Sectarianism, nationalism, and colonialism in Bahrain* (London: Oneworld, 2019), p. 94.

He founded the Şawlatiyyah school in 1875 with patronage from a wealthy woman from Calcutta Şawlat al-Nisā' Begum, whom he met during the pilgrimage.¹⁹

Also making their way to Mecca, probably in small numbers, were refugees fleeing Yunnan in southwestern China in the aftermath of the Panthay rebellion led by Du Wenxiu (杜文秀 1823–1872) in the latter half of the nineteenth century (1856–1873). While the underlying reasons for the rebellion were socio-political and had little to do with Islam as a belief system, a significant number of the followers were Muslims, to the extent that Du Wenxiu proclaimed himself a sultan in Dali in western Yunnan and utilized seals written in Sino-Arabic characters.²⁰ General Ma Rulong (馬如龍, ?~1891), who initially joined the rebellion but later defected to the Qing, is known to have donated a sum of money to purchase a lodging in Mecca for pilgrims coming from China.²¹

Yusuf Shinawi, also called Ma Fuchun 馬福春, was a young boy when he fled Dali. We know of his existence because of an anti-Japanese Chinese Islamic pilgrimage delegation that visited him in Mecca in 1939 and included the event in its report to the Chinese Nationalist government. The report said that Ma Fuchun was 73 years old and dealt precious stones: 'there was no one among the people of Mecca who did not know the Chinese merchant of precious stones: "Yusuf Shinawi"'. He was said to regularly offer hospitality to visitors from China, treating them with Pu'er tea of best quality.²² Ma Fuchun advised another group of Chinese Muslim pilgrim-cum-educators in 1933 that they should buy their return tickets from pilgrims from Jāwā (*zhaowa* 爪哇), an Arabic term referring to the Malay world. Reflecting the sizeable Southeast Asian pilgrims and settlers in the Hejaz, Ma Fuchun pointed out that Jāwā pilgrims were required by the Dutch to buy roundtrip tickets, but often decided to stay on and sell their return ticket at a good price.²³

The pilgrims, educators, and politicians who met Ma Fuchun hailed from Beijing and Shanghai, travelling on modern railways and steamships with passports in hand. Ma Fuchun and his father, by contrast, would have taken older modes of travel. The 1939 report mentions that Ma Fuchun came to Mecca at the age of eight—through Burma. He would have used early modern caravan merchant paths between

¹⁹Michael Farquhar, *Circuits of faith: Migration, education, and the Wahhabi Mission* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 38–40. Rosie Bsheer, *Archive wars: The politics of history in Saudi Arabia*, 2020 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), pp. 30–39. See also Seema Alavi, 'Fugitive Mullahs and outlawed fanatics': Indian Muslims in nineteenth century Trans-Asiatic imperial rivalries', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 6, 2011, pp. 1337–1382.

²⁰David G. Atwill, *The Chinese sultanate: Islam, ethnicity, and the Panthay rebellion in Southwest China, 1856–1873* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

²¹See Matsumoto Masumi, 'kindai unnan musurimu no isurāmu kaikaku to henyō suru aidentiti' in *Chūgoku kokkyō chiki no idō to kōryū: kin gendai chōgoku no minami to kita*, (ed.) Tsukada Seishi (Tokyo: Yūshisha, 2010), pp. 206–236, here 213. Not much is known about this lodging; the information comes from the preface of *Da Zaxue* (大雜學) by Ma Lianyuan (馬聯元, 1841–1903). I am grateful to Matsumoto Masumi for the information.

²²Huijiao Chaoshengtuan (Muslim Pilgrimage Delegation 回教朝聖團), 1939–1948, 112.21/0012 (11-WAA-00049), MFA (Taipei: Academia Sinica), 0037-0045.

²³Zhao Zhenwu (趙振武), *Xixing Riji* (*Journey westwards* 西行日記) (Beiping: Beiping Chengda Shifan Chubanbu, 1933), pp. 273–274.

southwestern Yunnan and Burma as he and his father fled the rebellion,²⁴ and may have boarded a steamer in Bombay, if we assume that he reached Mecca around 1874 as an eight-year-old boy.²⁵

The route from Yunnan and Burma to Mecca before steam travel came to the Indian Ocean is best described by Ma Dexin (馬德新 1794–1874), an influential scholar based in Dali who published several books on Sino-Islamic philosophy and was later embroiled in the Du Wenxiu rebellion. While his *hajj* in the mid-nineteenth century and the book that recorded the journey are well known among scholars of Islam in China, the specific routes and encounters that unfolded in transit points have received little attention. Ma Dexin undertook the *hajj* between 1841 and 1848, just as the first Opium War erupted in the southeastern port of Guangzhou, transforming the diplomatic and commercial status of Qing China. British arms and the logic of free trade crumbled what is known as the Canton system, the set of arrangements drawn by the Qing Empire to direct all foreign trade through Guangzhou. Ma Dexin in fact learned of the outbreak of the war in Istanbul in 1845, through British news relayed to him by an Ottoman minister.²⁶ He completed his travels in the years between the two Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860), and his account of the *hajj*, transcribed by his disciple, was published in 1861. It contained practical information on transit points, travel dates, and expenses, suggesting that by the end of the two Opium Wars, the *hajj* had become an increasingly viable possibility for a range of people in China (Figure 1).

Ma Dexin's account, *Records of the Paths to the Heavenly Square* (*Tianfang Tuji* 天方途紀), laid out the sea and river routes to and from Mecca in some detail and offered a condensed summary of the northern routes between present-day Xinjiang/East Turkestan and the Arabian Peninsula in the appendix. From Dali, Ma Dexin passed through Sipsongbanna (the southernmost tip of Yunnan province) with caravan merchants, then sailed along the Irrawaddy River, transiting in Ava and Yangon (Rangoon). He then proceeded to Calcutta, Ceylon, Malabar, Socotra, Aden, Mocha, Hodeida, Jeddah, Mecca, and Medina; after the pilgrimage, he sojourned in Cairo, Alexandria, Istanbul, Cyprus, and Jerusalem. In 1846, he took the sea route to Guangzhou from Mecca, returning to Yunnan through tributaries of the Pearl River.

Although British commercial interests and military power played critical roles in regulating maritime mobility in the nineteenth century, Ma Dexin's account reflects autonomous encounters and connections between Muslim diasporas in the Indian Ocean world. His hosts were local dignitaries in Islamic enclaves and institutions. In Rangoon, for instance, where he unexpectedly spent five months (February–July 1842)

²⁴C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian borderlands: The transformation of Qing China's Yunnan frontier* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 159–186. For Yunnanese Muslim traders in this space, Andrew Forbes and David Henley, *The Haw: Traders of the Golden Triangle* (Bangkok: Asia Film House, 1997). For an ethnographic exploration of border-crossing Yunnanese migrants, Wen-Chin Chang, *Beyond borders: Stories of Yunnanese Chinese migrants of Burma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

²⁵For re-spatialization of the *hajj* into connections between steamship and railway nodes from the mid-nineteenth century, Nile Green, 'The Hajj as its own undoing: Infrastructure and integration on the Muslim journey to Mecca', *Past & Present*, vol. 226, no. 1, 2015, pp. 193–226; Ulrike Freitag, *A history of Jeddah: The gate to Mecca in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 64–66.

²⁶Ma Dexin 馬德新, *Chaojin Tuji* 朝覲途記, trans. Ma Anli 馬安禮 (Unidentified, 1861), p. 10. Copy kept in the Princeton Library.

waiting for storms in the Indian Ocean to subside before boarding a ship for Jeddah, he stayed in the house of a Surat person named Mawlā Hāshim, suggesting that he briefly became part of the community of Gujarati Muslims in Rangoon that had forged extensive mercantile networks between the western coasts of India and Burma before and after the British colonial rule that followed the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–1826).²⁷

Similarly, during his second visit to Mecca for ‘umrah in 1846, Ma Dexin stayed in the house of a Jāwī (*zhuowei* 卓威) person named Aḥmad Mushfa‘ near the Gate of ‘Umrah in the middle of a deadly cholera outbreak in Mecca, tapping into historic pilgrimage and scholarship networks between the Hejaz and Southeast Asia.²⁸ And Ma Dexin was not alone. A Shaanxi person Ayyūb also stayed there. Ayyūb had wanted to accompany Ma Dexin back to China, but contracted cholera and lost his life. Ma Dexin headed to Jeddah with the help of the Jāwī Aḥmad Mushfa‘, sailing eastward via Hodeida, Karachi, Kerala (Alappuzha), Aceh, Penang, Malacca, Singapore, and Guangzhou.²⁹ As he transited the British port of Singapore, Ma Dexin encountered the Ḥaḍramī Arab diaspora in the emporium, something Chinese Muslim pilgrims experienced up to the mid-twentieth century. In Singapore, Ma Dexin stayed with Sayyid ‘Umar, whom he noted as the son of Hārūn from the family of Junayd. Sayyid ‘Umar was described as a wise and prosperous man from Hadhramaut who had lived in Singapore for three decades, engaged in trade, and possessed abundant religious scriptures.³⁰ This Sayyid ‘Umar was most likely Sayyid ‘Umar al-Junayd (1792–1852), a trader who operated in the vast diaspora networks between the Hadhramaut of southern Yemen and across the Indian Ocean.³¹ During his nine months in Singapore, Ma Dexin read Sayyid ‘Umar’s books and studied astronomy.

From Singapore, Ma Dexin headed to Guangzhou, situated at the connecting point between the Pearl River and the South China Sea that had been incorporated into the British sphere of influence. He arrived in 1848 aboard the Dayārām Mayārām, the shipmaster of which he described as a non-Muslim Bengali.³² During his month-long sojourn in Guangzhou, Ma Dexin stayed in the Haopan mosque, one of the city’s five main mosques—reflecting the role of mosques in China as trans-local communal spaces. His return to Yunnan was through the tributaries of the Pearl River;³³ bringing the route full circle, as he started westward from Yunnan via Ava and Yangon to the

²⁷Ibid., p. 2. For academic studies on historical Burmese Indian networks, Usha Mahajani, *The role of Indian minorities in Burma and Malaya* (Bombay: Vora, 1960); Nalini Ranjanwith Chakravarti, *The Indian minority in Burma: The rise and decline of an immigrant community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

²⁸Ma Dexin, *Chaojin Tuji*, p. 15. Eric Tagliacozzo, *The longest journey: Southeast Asians and the pilgrimage to Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁹Ibid., p. 16.

³⁰Ibid., p. 17.

³¹The Al-Junayd family had been based in Palembang for business in Dutch East Indies since around 1750 and had quickly relocated to Singapore soon after its founding in 1819 by Stamford Raffles as a British trading post. With his wealth, Syed Omar built the first mosque in Singapore in 1820. See Engseng Ho, *The graves of Tarim: Genealogy and mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 69–70. On businesses of al-Juneids in Dutch East Indies and Singapore: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_847_2004-12-29.html.

³²Ma Dexin, *Chaojin Tuji*, p. 18.

³³Ibid., p. 18. The river ports mentioned in the account were Zhaoqing 肇慶, Wuzhou 梧州, Xunzhou 潯州, Nanning 南寧, and Beisai 北賽/白色.

Indian Ocean, and returned through the South China Seas and the Pearl River via the eastern port of Guangzhou.

Besides the two sea routes to and from Mecca, Ma Dexin identified two overland routes in an appendix, under the title the *Northern Route to the Heavenly Square* (*Tianfang Beilu Tucheng* 天方北路途程). He laid out segments and variations of the so-called ‘southern’ and ‘central’ routes between Central Asia and the Arabian Peninsula of the early modern period—but with the borderlands between present-day Xinjiang and China proper as the starting point.³⁴ He gauged the distances between places according to the number of staging posts (*zhan* 站). From Jiayuguan—the westernmost end of the Great Wall—one could reach Bukhara: via Hami, Turfan, Aksu, Kashgar, Osh, Andijan, Margelan, Kokand, Jizzakh, and Samarkand. From Bukhara, the historical centre of Islamic learning, there were two routes to Baghdad: through Persia, via Chardzhou (Turkmenabat), Mashhad, Herat, Hamadan, and Kerman or heading southward from Bukhara through southern parts of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan via Balkh, Mazar Ali (Mazar Sharif), Tashkurgan (Kholm), Kabul, Ghazni, Kandahar, Pishin, Quetta and by sea onward to Baghdad. Baghdad led to the Levant, southern Anatolia, and the eastern Mediterranean—including Kirkuk, Mosul, Mardin, Urfa, Aleppo, Homs, Damascus, and Jerusalem.

Ma Dexin’s account of the ‘northern route’, a rather mechanical, abbreviated summary with no observations, was probably based on second-hand information. Nevertheless, its inclusion suggests an awareness of pathways between China and Arabia via Turkestan. Both the northern route that Ma Dexin described and the maritime route he took reflect a transitional moment between the two Opium Wars, when pilgrims from different parts of China would have relied primarily on early-modern modes of travel.

In the decades that followed, steamship and railway transport dramatically altered the speed and volume of travel, eliminating previous transit points and creating new ones. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 made Bombay and Istanbul the most popular transit points on the route to Mecca. Bombay was linked to Peshawar by rail and to major ports across the Indian Ocean under British influence. This included Shanghai, which quickly emerged as the international treaty port Muslim travellers from different parts of China flocked to in the early twentieth century. On the Russian front, investments in *hajj* infrastructure, including steam liners crossing the Black Sea and the opening of the Trans-Caspian (1899) and Tashkent-Orenburg (1906) railway lines made pilgrimage travel faster and more affordable. Odessa and Sevastopol became two major Black Sea ports for pilgrims, with those from Qing Xinjiang or Chinese Turkestan, especially Kashgar, constituting a significant portion of Central Asian pilgrimage traffic.³⁵ Though by no means available to everyone, these infrastructural transformations, precipitated by imperial interests, increased the accessibility of the *hajj*.

Paths to Mecca offered communities in post-Imperial Xinjiang rhetorical and physical means of escape from the incessant political fragmentations and wars. As shown

³⁴R. D. McChesney, ‘The Central Asian Hajj-Pilgrimage in the time of the early modern empires’, (ed.) Michel Mazzaoui, *Safavid Iran and her neighbors* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2003), pp. 129–156.

³⁵Can, *Spiritual subjects: Central Asian pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the end of empire*.

by the ethnographic work of Rian Thum and Huda Kashgari, exiles from Soviet Central Asia and Xinjiang flowed into Mecca throughout the 1930s to the 1950s in waves, gradually forming the ‘Turkistāni’ or ‘Bukhārī’ community in the Hejaz.³⁶ In the early 1930s, authorities in Kashgar, fearing that the demoralized people of Kashgar would emigrate en masse, began refusing to issue passports to potential pilgrims.³⁷ Chinese Muslim pilgrims who visited Mecca in the 1930s and 40s for diplomatic purposes also noted these exiles. Students at al-Azhar University who comprised the anti-Japanese Chinese Islamic delegation of 1939 estimated that an overseas Chinese (*Huaqiao* 華僑) population—as the Nationalist political representatives classified them—of around 2000 resided in the Hejaz Kingdom (*Hanzhi Wangguo* 漢志王國). Most were Turkic Muslims (*chanhui* 纏回; turbaned Muslims) from Xinjiang who ‘could not bear the regional government’s oppression and were getting by with difficulty in the sacred lands’. There were also small communities from Yunnan, Gansu, Ningxia, and Sichuan Provinces who had come to the region for commerce and pursuit of knowledge. Due to the absence of a Chinese diplomatic body in the Hejaz, the settlers did not receive the same treatment as diaspora subjects (*qiaomin* 僑民) from other countries. Practical issues such as obtaining passports, according to the report, forced them to become citizens of the Hejaz (*ru hanzhi guojin* 入漢志國籍).³⁸

With the post-Second World War turmoil of China and East Asia, refugees and political exiles from not only Xinjiang and Tibet but regions farther east such as Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan used the *hajj* to flee from China. Significant in this regard was the exile of Hussein Ma Bufang (馬步芳, 1903–1975), a former warlord and governor of Qinghai Province, who took 200–300 of his close familial and political associates to Mecca on the eve of Communist victory in 1949. Ma had exerted immense influence in the region by raising a modern army, monopolizing trade, implementing re-forestation policies, and supporting a moderately puritanical branch of Islam while allying with Chiang Kaishek of the Nationalist Party. He had fought the last battles against the People’s Liberation Army in Lanzhou, Gansu Province.³⁹ With the Nationalist loss clear, Ma Bufang boarded an aircraft of the Civil Air Transport (CAT) operated by Claire Lee Chennault, a retired officer of the United States Army Air Corps. Chennault, an ally of the Nationalist Party, had contacted Ma Bufang toward the end of the Civil War in hopes of operating commercial airline routes in northwestern provinces and directing weapons to Muslim warlords to turn the war’s tide. When the US Congress turned down Chennault’s proposal and the Communist victory was evident, the CAT airlifted Ma Bufang, his relatives, and political associates out of Xining via Guangzhou and Hong Kong.⁴⁰ From there, they headed to Jeddah.

³⁶Thum and Kashgari, ‘The Turkistanis of Mecca’.

³⁷Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *Community matters in Xinjiang, 1880–1949*, p. 347.

³⁸Huijiao Chaoshengtuan (Muslim Pilgrimage Delegation 回教朝聖團), 1939–1948, 112.21/0012 (11-WAA-00049), MFA. Taipei, Academia Sinica, 0037-0045.

³⁹Merrill R Hunsberger, ‘Ma Pu-Fang in Chinghai Province, 1931–1949’, (PhD dissertation, Philadelphia, Temple University, 1977).

⁴⁰William M. Leary, *Perilous missions: Civil air transport, and CIA covert operations in Asia* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1984), pp. 73–80.

The Chinese Civil War (1946–1949) forced as many as two million refugees to Taiwan, an estimated 700,000 to Hong Kong between 1949 and 1951, and tens of thousands to Burma.⁴¹

The number who headed to Mecca pales in comparison. The trickle of pilgrim-refugees, nevertheless, points to the city's position as the receiver of exiles from political turnover and war in Asia. Mecca's borders were in fact remarkably open through the 1940s and 50s, to the extent that King 'Abdul 'Aziz and his successor King Sa'ūd reportedly welcomed Hussein Ma Bufang's group upon arrival—first in 1949, then in 1956 when they returned from a seven-year sojourn in Cairo. It was during the late 1940s and 50s too, that the first two waves of refugees from the Arakan region in Burma found a haven in Mecca. Streams of Burmese escapees continued arriving up through the 1970s, creating *Barmāwī* populations in Saudi Arabia that are now a quarter million or more, with most living in densely concentrated enclaves in Mecca that constitute 71 blocks.⁴²

Ma's sojourns in Mecca, Jeddah, and Cairo in the 1950s reflect how closely intertwined pilgrimage, exile, and diplomacy were. The *hajj* offered Ma Bufang's group a way out twice, first from Qinghai in mainland China, then from Cairo. After the arrival in Mecca in 1949, they relocated to Cairo, attracted, as Ma Bufang's acquaintances recalled, by the more vibrant and modern lifestyle compared with the newly founded state of Saudi Arabia. Intending to settle, the group stayed until the rise of Jamal Abdul Nasser, followed by Egypt's official recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1956. When Ma Bufang returned to Mecca in 1956, it was under the pretext of leading the anti-Communist Chinese Islamic pilgrimage delegation dispatched by the Taipei-based Republic of China (ROC). In 1957, Ma Bufang was appointed the first ambassador of the newly established Embassy of the Republic of China in Jeddah, a post he held for four years.

The rest of Ma Bufang's group settled in the mountainous and conservative town of Ta'if that topographically resembled, as many of the community recalled, the settlers' homes back in Gansu and Qinghai. Rather than being integrated into Mecca, they formed a relatively secluded enclave. According to interviews with the first generation of settlers and accounts by anti-communist pilgrimage delegations from Taipei, members of the Chinese community in Ta'if made their living through the 1960s and 70s sewing white skullcaps, or *ṭāqīyyah*, to sell in the markets of Tai'f.

Besides Ma Bufang's group, individual escapees from the borderlands of China arrived in Mecca as refugees throughout the 1950s, but without the social capital of the former warlord's families. Loqman, the father-in-law of Aisha mentioned earlier, was one. Originally from Lintan (臨潭) in the southern part of Gansu Province, Loqman was identified as a class enemy during the anti-rightist campaigns of the late 1950s. Leaving his wife, children, and siblings behind, he fled Gansu via Tibet and took a steamship from Bombay to Jeddah (Figure 2). In Mecca, he married Assiya, a member of the 'Kache' community—or Tibetan Muslims—who had escaped Lhasa with her family

⁴¹Steven B. Miles, *Chinese diasporas: A social history of global migration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 171–173. See also Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang, *The great exodus from China: Trauma, memory, and identity in modern Taiwan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁴²Morad Alshafiq, 'Language proficiency and usage among second- and third-generation Rohingya refugees in Mecca', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2021, pp. 37–51.

through the *hajj* under circumstances like Loqman's.⁴³ The couple settled in Ta'if and spent a few years in the waqf for the Chinese community, sewing skullcaps to meet expenses.

In 1961, the Embassy of the Republic of China recorded the names of the 'overseas inland Chinese compatriots in Saudi Arabia' (*lüsha neidi qiaobao* 旅沙內地僑胞), their places of origin (*jiguan* 籍貫), ages, and citizenship statuses. The diaspora communities from Xinjiang lay so beyond the reach of the Embassy that they were not included in the report. Of the 220 men and 174 women surveyed aged between 1 and 90, 242 were from Gansu; 77 from Qinghai; 34 from Tibet; 12 from Ningxia; nine from Yunnan; six from Sichuan; two from Xinjiang; one from Xikang; and one from Hong Kong. The survey included 10 women from 'Arabia (A-la-bo 阿拉伯)', suggesting a handful of intermarriages, although the exact meaning of 'Arabia' remains unclear. Among those counted, 109 had acquired Saudi citizenship; 173 had permanent resident status; and 110, mostly from Tibet, Sichuan, and Gansu, had neither citizenship nor residency. Many of the listed names were a combination of Chinese surnames (such as Ma, Sha, Hai, Han, Min, Na, and Lin) and Arabic names (i.e. Ma Maria, Ma 'Abdullah), whereas elderly persons who had spent time in China often had full Chinese names.⁴⁴ The gathering of the data likely had to do with Prince Faisal's decree that year requiring all Saudi populations to carry standard identification papers, which reflected the Saudi state's increasing desire to bring the sociologically diverse populations and disparate identification regimes in the kingdom under its orbit.⁴⁵ For recently arrived refugees from mainland China with neither citizenship nor residency, the Republic of China in Taipei, which developed close diplomatic and economic relations with Saudi Arabia in the course of the Cold War, was the only political entity that offered citizenship and a passport. In the years to come, as paths to citizenship in Saudi Arabia narrowed, the livelihoods and career prospects of the Sino-Saudi diaspora populations would diverge significantly, as we will see.

Endowment institutions in Mecca

Individuals who reached Mecca after escaping from Gansu, Qinghai, and Tibet but had no means of settling down, found temporary housing in waqfs established for pilgrims from China. A waqf is a pious endowment wherein a property is donated for charitable or religious purposes, with the principal remaining inalienable; it is a complex legal and philanthropic institution that has operated across Islamic societies in various forms for more than a millennium. Waqf has supported a variety of communal spaces—including cemeteries, mosques, libraries, lodgings, schools, hospitals, and public kitchens. A recent article by Amelia Fauzia, Till Mostowlansky, and Nurfadzilah Yahya points out the waqf's potential to expand scholarship on inter-Asian connections by highlighting 'transregional circulations through the lens of social and material

⁴³On Kache mercantile and diplomatic networks over the Himalayan region, David G. Atwill, *Islamic Shangri-La: Inter-Asian relations and Lhasa's Muslim communities, 1600 to 1960* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

⁴⁴Shawudi Alabo Qiaojiao (沙烏地阿拉伯僑教) 1957-10 ~ 1969-09. 11-04-10-12-01-006. MFA (Taipei: Academia Sinica), 00083-00101.

⁴⁵Samin, *Of sand or soil*, pp. 184-185.

places and infrastructures'.⁴⁶ Whereas older scholarship tended to view waqfs as static and closed institutions, Amy Singer points out that they 'may be studied more usefully as offering insights into the way in which waqf activities were malleable not to say mutable, and their functions capable of creating or reinforcing the mobility of people, goods, and property'.⁴⁷ Such flexibility has been observed by Matthew Erie for Chinese Muslims' waqf institutions and other Islamic philanthropies in the PRC.⁴⁸

Bearing Singer out, in the Hejaz, lodgings established through the waqf created spaces of communal gathering for pilgrims and sojourners coming from expansive geographies. Some of my interviewees who arrived in Saudi Arabia in their teens or twenties in the mid-twentieth century compared Chinese waqf to huiguan—the communal gathering places established in China and among diaspora Chinese societies organized along dialects or territorial native places. In immigrant societies, huiguan smoothed a new arrival's settlement and provided financial assistance. As Maurice Freedman has noted, these associations 'acted as what should nowadays call social service agencies, providing shelter, religious worship, and fellowship for men thrown down in a strange environment'.⁴⁹ His observation that 'When immigrants are thrown in a strange setting where they must make their social life among themselves, they are likely to divide into units which express the solidarity of homeland ties. The village, the country, the prefecture, and the dialect area provided overseas Chinese with lines along which to organize themselves'⁵⁰ is applicable to Chinese Muslim diasporas in Saudi Arabia and the organization of waqf institutions in Jeddah and Mecca. Mecca and its gate Jeddah were home to region-specific waqf or *ribāt* that assisted sojourning sheikhs, students, and merchants from across the Indian Ocean and Central Asia.⁵¹

It is worth looking at how a waqf for pilgrims from China underwent construction, destruction, and reconstruction: I have pieced this history together from scattered textual sources and ethnographic encounters. When I met Ḥusayn Sulaymān 'Umar al-Šīnī in 2017 in the outskirts of Mecca, he was close to 90 and still identified himself as a Salar, or Chinese Muslims who trace their origins to Central Asia and speak a form of Turkic. He arrived in Mecca at the age of eight with his family and his uncle's families—around 30 people altogether—toward the end of the Second World War. His father had visited Mecca five years earlier and had met a *muṭawwif* (pilgrimage guide)

⁴⁶Amelia Fauzia, Till Mostowlansky, and Nurfadzilah Yahaya, 'Muslim endowments in Asia: Waqf, charity and circulations', *The Muslim World*, vol. 108, no. 4, 2018, pp. 587–592, here 590.

⁴⁷Amy Singer, 'Replace stasis with motion to fathom the persistence of Waqf: The complex histories and legacies of a Muslim institution', *The Muslim World*, vol. 108, no. 4, 2018, pp. 702–716, here 712.

⁴⁸Matthew S. Erie, 'Sharia, charity, and Minjian autonomy in Muslim China: Gift giving in a plural world', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2016, pp. 311–324; Matthew S. Erie, 'The traveling Waqf: Property, religion, and mobility beyond China', *Islamic Law and Society*, vol. 25, no. 1–2, 2018, pp. 121–155.

⁴⁹Maurice Freedman, 'Immigrants and associations: Chinese in nineteenth-century Singapore', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1960, pp. 25–48, here 40.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵¹Norihiro Naganawa, 'The Hajj making geopolitics, empire, and local politics: A view from the Volga-Ural region at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', in *Hajj routes and pious visits between Central Asia and the Hijaz*, (eds) Alexandre Papas, Thomas Welsford, and Thierry Zarcone (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2012), pp. 176–177; Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the latter part of the 19th century: Daily life, customs and learning. The Moslims of the East-Indian Archipelago*, (trans.) J.H. Monahan, with an introduction by Jan Just Witkam (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 274–275.

named Muhammad Ghandura, who had visited China with his father and stayed for three to four months. Ghandura, Hussein recalled, acted as a *sayyed* and collected gifts from the locals. He persuaded Hussein's father and uncle's families to move to Mecca.

From a very small town in Qinghai whose name Hussein does not remember, they followed caravan traders to Lhasa, then moved on to Kalimpong, Calcutta, and Bombay, where they stayed in an endowed lodging house (*musāfir khānah*) until boarding a steamship to Jeddah. From Jeddah, a day or two of camel travel took them to Mecca, where they found a waqf for Chinese close to the Haram. The building, Hussein found out, had been constructed by a 'rich person from China' two decades earlier. As Mecca had no substantial Chinese community, the waqf's founder entrusted its management to an 'Indian' scholar; the scholar built a structure of four or five stories, which his family occupied. The small waqf next door had two floors: on the ground floor, there was a store and a small room in the back. The second floor had living space, partly occupied by a 'great scholar' from China named Ramadan and his family. Hussein went on to graduate from the aforementioned Şawlatiyyah School—founded by Rahmat Allah from Uttar Pradesh—and eventually worked as a public-school teacher.

Tracing the flows of persons and donations that converged in the waqf in Mecca across the inter-war, Cold War, and post-Cold War periods shows the durability and fluidity with which trans-regional diaspora and religious networks reassembled themselves through ruptures and offers a lens that is less static than a focus on interstate relations. The waqf for pilgrims from China that Hussein observed was built in the 1920s with the endowment of Ma Fuxiang (馬福祥, 1876–1932), a warlord and politician who, along with Ma Bufang's lineage in Qinghai, exerted influence in the Gansu Province while pledging allegiance first to the Qing imperial court and then the Nationalist Party. According to the memoir of the cleric Qi Mingde (祁明德 1894–1987), popularly known as Long Ahong (聾阿訇) or the 'deaf imam', his father Qi Huantang (祁煥堂 1852–1933) handled the transfer of donations to Mecca at the request of Ma Fuxiang. Long Ahong was based in Linxia (臨夏, formerly Hezhou 河州)—often called 'little Mecca' in China because it was the epicentre of different Islamic denominations—and defended orthodox/traditionalist (*qedimu* 格迪目; *qadīm*) teachings and Sufi orders against reformist Yihewani (伊赫瓦尼 *ikhwani*) criticisms. Long Ahong's memoir, published posthumously, notes that Qi Huantang purchased a building near the Haram with contributions from Hezhou's Muslims and the warlord Ma Fuxiang. While precise details are missing, according to the memoir, the rights to the waqf were to be split between Ma Fuxiang, Hezhou's Muslims, and 'Sheikh Mansumu (*shaihe mansumu* 篩赫滿蘇木)', a scholar reportedly respected by Muslims in Hezhou.⁵²

By the 1930s, the waqf was hosting pilgrims from China—a change from the mid-nineteenth century when Ma Dexin stayed in the house of a Jāwī host. In 1936, Muslim student Ma Mingdao (馬明道) from Beijing who had been residing in Ankara and performed the pilgrimage wrote that there were four 'Chinese' pilgrim lodge houses in Mecca. One was for the 'Dungan' (Chinese-speaking Muslims in northwest China) people, another for Kashgar people (those taking the southern route of Xinjiang), one for

⁵² Long Ahong 聾阿訇 (Linxia: Gansusheng Linxiashi Mingde Qingzhensi, 2004), pp. 20–22.

Ili (those taking the northern route of Xinjiang), and one for people from Hami, in eastern Xinjiang. Although the houses were divided, he noted that the boundaries were not clear on the ground.⁵³ The ‘Dungan’ housing built with assistance from Ma Fuxiang was managed by a certain Hassan and housed Chinese pilgrims who had come by different routes, some through Shanghai and others via India, a handful of whom had occupied political positions in the Qinghai Province.⁵⁴

The waqf for Chinese pilgrims underwent destruction and reconstruction over a century, sustained by trans-regional donations and their re-routings. For nearly 30 years, due to the absence of diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Chinese Muslim exiles in Saudi Arabia lacked access to mainland China. Relations were established only in 1990; until then, Taiwan represented the legitimate China for many of US-allied states, including Saudi Arabia. When the ḥajj lodge’s external ties with mainland China were cut off during the Cold War, the small building was claimed by newly arrived exiles who reconfigured circulations of persons and donations. According to the diaries of Shams al-Dīn al-‘Ālī Gao Wenyuan (高文遠, 1911–2008), a scholar-politician who served in Ma Bufang’s cabinet in Qinghai Province in the 1940s and settled in Ta’if after the Communist victory, the reconstruction of the old waqf in Mecca was funded by contributions from Chinese Muslim communities in Hong Kong and Thailand.

The waqf was initially destroyed in 1955 during Mecca’s urbanization and industrialization, which included expansion of the Grand Mosque. Managed by the Saudi Bin Ladin Group, the process has drawn much criticism for eradicating historical relics and neighbourhoods.⁵⁵ When the waqf was destroyed, a decade-long lawsuit began between the Chinese diaspora community and the so-called Indian person—likely the aforementioned Sheikh ‘Mansumu’—over who had the right to the compensation money. The diaspora community even sought a letter from Ma Fuxiang’s son Ma Hongkui (馬鴻逵, 1892–1970), then in exile in Los Angeles raising horses.⁵⁶ The Chinese representatives ultimately won the lawsuit and compensation totalling around 200,000 Saudi riyals, approximately \$60,000, ‘a big number at the time’—with the condition that the money be used to build another lodge.⁵⁷

Since housing prices in Mecca had skyrocketed, Gao Wenyuan solicited donations from co-religionists in Thailand and Hong Kong, who contributed around \$15,000, with \$1 equalling about 4.5 Saudi riyal. Gao’s private diary lists five donations from Hong Kong between 1971 and 1976, totalling US\$7755, most of which were transferred

⁵³Ma Mingdao (馬明道), ‘Cong Yisidanbu Dao Maijia (從伊斯擔堡到麥加)’, *Chenxi* (晨熹), vol. 2, no. 9, 1936, p. 19.

⁵⁴Ma Mingdao (馬明道), ‘Cong Yisidanbu Dao Maijia’ *Chenxi* (晨熹), vol. 2, no. 10, 1936, p. 31; Ma Mingdao (馬明道), ‘Cong Yisidanbu Dao Maijia’, *Chenxi* (晨熹), vol. 2, no. 12, 1936, p. 33.

⁵⁵Bsheer, *Archive wars*, especially pp. 165–207.

⁵⁶The conflict left trails in Academia Historica Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives (Taipei), 11-WAA-00823, 1955.

⁵⁷Gao Wenyuan, ‘Qiaojū Shatē Alabō (僑居沙烏地阿拉伯)’ (Unpublished memoir, Xining, n.d.). For a published version, Gao Wenyuan, ‘Yixiang Si Guyuan, Tanzhi Wushinian—Qiaojū Shatē Alabode Huiyi (異鄉思固原, 彈指五十年—僑居沙烏地阿拉伯回憶)’, *Kaituo* 開拓 vol. 42, no. 1, 2003, pp. 26–32. Gao Family Archives.

into the hands of ‘Sa Ḥājī 薩哈智’ and ‘Sha Yikun (沙義坤)’.⁵⁸ A house on al-Qubay’s mountain was purchased with roughly \$43,000, with another \$28,000 spent to add two floors. The finished building had four stories, with 12 rooms that accommodated about 130 people. Every year pilgrims from Hong Kong, along with a small number from Thailand, stayed there. As the Haram underwent another round of reconstruction, however, the lodge was once again destroyed. For this, according to Gao, the government compensated about 1,300,000 Saudi riyal, which he judged as quite profitable.

Interviews and public and private documents show that the waqf was revived again in the past decade. When I met Ḥusayn Sulaymān ‘Umar in 2017, he corrected the amount of money given for the demolished waqf—saying it was actually 1,317,000 riyal. He added that the money was kept intact until a new waqf was purchased a few years ago, which he knew since he was the ‘administrator’ (*nāzir* or *wakīl*) of the new waqf. Whereas the old waqf was in the Sha‘b ‘Alī district, he explained, the new one was in al-Ḥajūn region in Mecca. It was bought around 2013, after the previous administrator of the waqf passed away. The new building has six floors, with six rooms on every floor and a store on the ground floor. As Ḥusayn put it:

Now in Mecca, there are two waqfs. The big waqf has six stories and thirty rooms. Two floors are for families, about three to four. They live throughout the year. They have residence permit, and work, too. They were born here. There are two Tibetan families who are poor and live there for free. There are also Chinese women, old in their age, and they have lived with us for five to six years in the waqf. The rest of the rooms are for pilgrims, during Ramadan for example, who number 20, 30, or 40. They make the pilgrimage, live for three to four months, and go back. This waqf is from the 1,317,000 riyals. This is the waqf that I am the administrator for, in the region of al-Ḥajūn ... The official pilgrims come in groups of 10,000 or 12,000 and rent places. [But] there are pilgrims who use other ways to come for the pilgrimage, out of their own pockets. They come, maybe five, ten or 15 of them, in the name of traders, etc., and stay in waqf for free. These are unofficial ways. We take from them fees for electricity, like ten riyals for each person. For one month they would pay 300 Saudi riyal. This is for water and electricity.⁵⁹

Besides the waqf overseen by Ḥusayn, another waqf was endowed by Ma Bufang in the Ajiyād region in Mecca when he returned from Cairo. This waqf was initially managed by Ma Bufang’s descendants, but since they were based in Jeddah, they turned it over to the government. The present supervisor is Turkistānī, and the building is used primarily by Turkistānīs.

The waqf founded by Ma Bufang provided a resting place for the few students coming from Taiwan during the Cold War period. Ibrahim Chao, a scholar and diplomat who is currently the imam of the Taipei Central Mosque, describes the building in his

⁵⁸‘Sa Ḥājī’ most likely referred to Sa Zhaoxi (薩兆熙), who in 1973 left a handwritten account of his pilgrimage, kept in the Ma Dawu Library (Haji Imam Mohamed Yaqub MA Tat Ng Library) in Hong Kong within the Islamic Union of Hong Kong.

⁵⁹Author interview, 2 May 2017.

memoir. Chao, who spent his youth in Taipei and learned Arabic at the Taipei Central Mosque, studied in Sanusi University in Bayda in Libya (1963–1976) and then in the College of Sharia in Mecca (1977–1985).⁶⁰ In Mecca, Chao came across two Chinese waqf institutions, which he calls *huiguan* (會館). The older one was situated halfway up a hill between the mountain ridges in around Sha'b Hishām; several elderly single overseas Chinese (*huaqiao* 華僑) lived there, including an escapee from Tibet pursuing his degree in the College of Sharia, who passed away shortly after finishing his studies. Ibrahim stayed in the housing located in the Ajjiyād district, a 'very sturdy building' built with contributions from Ma Bufang. Ma Bufang's eldest grandson arranged a room for his stay, and a Chinese family (*qiaobao* 僑胞) who lived on the lower floor was responsible for tending the building.⁶¹

As can be seen from Ibrahim's juxtaposition of the waqf in Mecca and *huiguan*, the act of collecting individual contributions to build public spaces for specific populations was not unique to Islamic or Chinese immigrant societies. The range of geographies connected to the waqf for Chinese pilgrims and residents in Mecca, however, reflects both the city's position as a trans-regional magnet and the mobility of Chinese Muslims connected to it. A variety of Chinese Muslims actors dispersed across Asia transited in and sustained the waqf institutions in Mecca: from the warlords of northwestern China and pilgrims from Beijing and Shanghai in the early twentieth century, to diaspora Chinese Muslim communities in Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan through the Cold War, and more recently, newly arriving merchant pilgrims from mainland China. Such convergence sites are microcosms of the routes through which pilgrims, exiles, and refugees travelled. The destruction and revival of transnational communal institutions reveal the flexibility of Islamic networks that continuously re-route themselves in response to geopolitical transformations.

Everywhere and nowhere to call home

It was in Mecca that Muhammad, Aisha's husband-to-be, first reunited in the early 1980s with previously unknown relatives from mainland China. In 1983, his half-sibling and elder brother Ibrahim performed the pilgrimage through a relative invitation visa. Ibrahim was barely four years old when his father left China in the 1950s to escape anti-rightist campaigns. When Ibrahim reached Jeddah and Mecca with his mother and elder brother and finally met his father, Ibrahim was 30. It was a tearful encounter, he recalled when I met him in his home in Linxia. He stayed in Ta'if for four months and met Muhammad, who was 13 years old. Ibrahim then performed the pilgrimage six times until 2011, sometimes staying in Saudi Arabia for as long as a year. Muhammad and Ibrahim's father, who had spent three decades in Ta'if, returned to China for the first time in 1989 and passed away not in the Hejaz, but in Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu Province. His body was moved to his ancestral home of Lintan and buried with his parents and grandparents.

⁶⁰The College of Sharia in Mecca became a part of King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, then was incorporated into Umm al-Qura University when it opened in Mecca in 1981.

⁶¹Chao Xilin (趙錫麟), *Tianfang Xueya—Chao Xilin Xiansheng Fangtanlu* (Oral History Series No. 74. *The reminiscences of Dr. Ibrahim Chao* 天方學涯—趙錫麟先生訪談錄), (ed.) Chang Chung-fu (張中復, Interviewer) and Yu Jiaming (於嘉明, Recorder) (Taipei: Guoshiguan (Academia Historica), 2014), pp. 135–136.

Rather than a return to a singular ancestral home, the posthumous relocation of Muhammad's father represented one of many multi-directional homecomings. In his formative essay, William Safran suggested six criteria that define 'diaspora', based on his interpretations of the Jewish model: they include dispersal from a 'center' to the 'peripheral' region(s), maintenance of 'a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland', and the idea of an eventual return to the 'true, ideal home'.⁶² Home, however, need not be understood in the singular. As pointed out by James Clifford, emphasis on the teleology of origin/return to a real or symbolic homeland obscures 'decentered, lateral connections' between diasporas that may be as important.⁶³ Diaspora, in Clifford's words, 'involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home'.⁶⁴ The question of where the central home lies becomes ever more ambiguous for travellers and diasporas who dwell in Saudi Arabia, where the elevated status of Mecca as the House of God offers believers worldwide the possibility of articulating a sense of belonging. Notwithstanding the bureaucratization of the *hajj* and the near impossibility since the late twentieth century of obtaining citizenship in the Gulf states, some second-generation British-Bengali youth regard the *hajj* as a homecoming to Mecca where everyone is united as equals.⁶⁵ Or as Henan, a Chinese Muslim woman who undertook the *hajj* from Sangpo, reported in 2008: 'When I arrived in Mecca, I felt that I returned back to my real home. I began to cry at the mere sight of the Ka'ba. I just couldn't help doing so with all that emotion I felt ... Mecca was like our own old home and utterly familiar to us all. We never felt strange when we stayed there. If only we could have stayed on longer.'⁶⁶ While trajectories by pilgrims defined as such pose a contrast to those of long-term labourers from Indonesia in Saudi Arabia,⁶⁷ the distinctions between pilgrim and migrant have not always been clear. Interpretation of Mecca as a shared home has periodically provided a repertoire for longer-term, multi-generational diaspora communities in Saudi Arabia, formed through the pilgrimage, to represent themselves as *muhājirūn*, or escapees fleeing from religious persecution, and to claim their standing in the public sphere.

Chinese Muslims who have straddled the Hejaz and the PRC since the end of the Cold War suggest that home(s) elsewhere, rediscovered, could offer alternative spaces of cultural belonging and a source of social capital beyond the logics of the nation-state. Following Clifford, connections with prior homes, regions, or a 'world-historical force' such as Islam, 'Africa', or 'China' provides 'added weight to claims against an

⁶²William Safran, 'Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return', *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1991, pp. 83–99, here 83.

⁶³James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 249–250.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁶⁵Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, 'Of Hajj and home: Roots visits to Mecca and Bangladesh in everyday belonging', *Ethnicities*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2013, pp. 457–474.

⁶⁶Maria Jaschok and Jingjun Shui, 'Back home from Mecca: Negotiating identity and gender, status, and afterlife', in *The changing world religion map: Sacred places, identities, practices and politics. Volumes 1–5*, (ed.) Stanley D. Brunn (Berlin: Springer, 2015), p. 3177.

⁶⁷Mirjam Lücking, *Indonesians and their Arab world: Guided mobility among labor migrants and Mecca pilgrims* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

oppressional national hegemony'.⁶⁸ Rekindling diasporic connections and potentially utilizing such external connections as positive sources, therefore, are contingent on world events and the values associated with transnational powers and forces. If the Cold War radically severed mobility between the divided blocs, its unravelling initiated a rush of cross-border reconnections for Chinese Muslim diasporas in the Hejaz and their acquaintances in the PRC. The open-up-and-reform policy under Deng Xiaoping starting in late 1978 created openings in political and economic spheres. Political liberalization lessened the state's suppression of religious spheres and initiated the building of new international ties. Economic opening through the designation of special economic zones in coastal China offered opportunities for diaspora networks whose ties with home places in mainland China had been cut. Although, as mentioned, Saudi Arabia only severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan and recognized the PRC in 1990, the last country to do so in the Middle East, for a decade prior to that event, Riyadh and Beijing had exchanged unofficial visits mediated by the semi-governmental religious institutions of the World Muslim League in Mecca and the Chinese Islamic Association in Beijing. What did the loosening of control over mobility mean for Chinese Muslim diaspora communities in Saudi Arabia? What kinds of returns or lack thereof do we see?

The following final section introduces stories of individuals and families based in Saudi Arabia, ranging from first- to third-generation diasporas with direct experiences or memories of China, some with citizenship in Saudi Arabia, some without. Based on fieldwork conducted primarily in 2017, this section highlights not only the logistical and cultural constraints that the Chinese Muslim communities have faced as long-time residents and citizens in the Saudi nation-state but brings to the fore the surprisingly manifold ways they have formulated external connections of kinship, trade, education, and business. These network formations are intertwined and involve intermixing of old settlers with newcomers, and sometimes the relocation of women as marriage partners. Migration thus should not be seen solely as straight lines from point A to B motivated by push and pull factors, but as a dynamic arena in which old ties are revived and new ones branch off. This open-endedness has been crystallized in Mecca and the possibilities offered by routes to and from the city. The coalescence of pilgrimage and escape, in other words, has produced multi-generational, dispersed diaspora communities that have interwoven new connections at moments of opening.

For Muhammad, building relations with cousins and half-siblings in Gansu Province was both a personal journey and an opportunity to venture into shuttle trade. His father's travel from Ta'if to Lanzhou while living, and to Lintan after his death, signalled the beginning of later generations' remaking of transnational networks of kinship and commerce across dispersed locales. Muhammad, born and raised in Ta'if, enthusiastically travelled to mainland China through the 1990s and connected with previously unseen relatives—in Gansu on his father's side and in Lhasa on his mother's. Attending one welcome gathering after another, Muhammad was fascinated to find homes that, back in Ta'if, he had not imagined. Despite having been born and raised on Saudi soil, he, unlike some of his older siblings, had not been able to obtain citizenship, which limited his ability to get an education, a job, or sell property.

⁶⁸Clifford, *Routes*, p. 255.

It was through the revitalization of latent kinship ties between China and Saudi Arabia, that Aisha, a member of Muhammad's extended family living in Aba County in Sichuan Province, made her way to Ta'if. She arrived in 1990, newly married to Muhammad, after a two-day train ride to Beijing, a flight to Karachi, then onward travel to Jeddah. At 17, just graduated from middle school, Aisha could not have imagined living in Ta'if for the next 30 years, gradually adjusting to customs that initially seemed starkly alien—without a single return trip back to mainland China, even as her husband went annually. She did reunite twice with her mother in Mecca when her mother performed the pilgrimage. Interpreting her diasporic experiences and involvement in kinship networks as reinforced gender subordination, however, misses her strategic engagements with past and present homes, complex outlooks on the future, and the dwellings she has mediated while facing the demands of family and the pressures of patriarchy.⁶⁹

With increasing frequency, Aisha saw Muhammad off as he set out for China to expand his commercial activities. When I first encountered them in Ta'if in 2017, Muhammad had an office in Guangzhou for his tea stores in Ta'if and Jeddah and visited Guangzhou, Yunnan, and Gansu at least once yearly. Re-forging ties of kinship and pilgrimage had allowed Muhammad to discover not only connections with distant places, but an alternative means of living. As he started frequenting China, Muhammad began working with his siblings and cousins there to export jewellery and porcelain from the re-emergent industrial centre of Guangzhou to Jeddah. With the Saudi recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1990, Muhammad quickly ventured into long-distance commerce, with his elder half-brother Ibrahim as his main partner. They sold vases, decorative items, and carpets at market exhibitions in Saudi cities, earning twice the products' original price. Eventually, they branched out to importing and selling tea, a field that Muhammad was personally interested in and came to hold dear.

For Ibrahim, business in Saudi Arabia was an extension of what he had been doing in China. Since 1981, he had frequented Guangzhou, Beijing and other cities as a private peddler. His decade of travels meant he was not deterred or surprised by the difficulties he faced in Saudi Arabia, he explained. Although he did not speak Arabic fluently, he could understand it. He eventually retired to Linxia, which, in his words, has better soil and more convenient living conditions than the family home place of Lintan. In 2000, he helped Muhammad purchase a house in Linxia. When I visited him there in 2017, Ibrahim had retired and begun to attend a local school for daily Quran lessons.

In the summer of 2017, Aisha, with Muhammad and three of their children, returned to China for the first time in 27 years. I accompanied them from Jeddah to Guangzhou, then to Lanzhou and Linxia. As she landed at the Guangzhou airport, she reluctantly took off her face veil (*niqab*) at her daughters' repeated teasing that people would mistake her for a terrorist. In the next weeks, she would undergo emotional reunions with her elderly mother, siblings, and extended family in Gansu and Sichuan.

Aisha's residency in Ta'if offered family members in China paths out; her presence made possible the sojourns of her two younger brothers in Saudi Arabia. By the time she travelled to China, her younger brothers had spent a decade or two in Saudi Arabia and had returned to China. Her two brothers-in-law had also sojourned in Saudi

⁶⁹Clifford, p. 259.

Arabia for several years. When I spoke to Aisha's youngest brother Yusuf, in Linxia, he said that being under his sister's care in Ta'if made him feel less like a person floating in a foreign country. Growing up in Aba (Sichuan) and Linxia, Yusuf had learned atheist principles at governmental schools, while praying and abstaining from pork at home. To resolve what he perceived as contradictions that created a split life, he experimented with attending a religious school in Linxia at the age of 17. After an unsuccessful attempt to study in Malaysia, he decided to go to Saudi Arabia—not to pursue education, but to assist his brother-in-law's business. For nearly a decade, Yusuf accompanied Muhammad around cities in Saudi Arabia, selling tea in market fairs held that lasted a week to 10 days. These fairs let them sell without an official store, which, as non-Saudi residents, they could not open. As Yusuf wore glasses, people conceived of him as a doctor from China and praised him for his ability to recite the Quran. He eventually returned to Linxia to care for his mother, teaching Arabic at one of the dozens of religious schools in the city and working as a translator for a local company.

Aisha supported her immediate and extended family with remarkable strength, raising eight children and caring for her numerous in-laws in Ta'if. Throughout, she found unwavering solace in the fact that she lived near the sacred cities. After three decades in Ta'if, she still considered herself an outsider: she was 'living in Saudi Arabia because of Mecca and Medina, and nothing else. As for other matters, nothing holds importance.' She has no way of knowing whether she would return to China in 20 or 30 years, but when she grows old, she wants to live in Mecca and be close to the Haram.

The linkages that Aisha and Muhammad cultivated with their faraway home places in China gave their children, born and raised in Saudi Arabia but without citizenship, familiarity with places where they could potentially live without the logistical constraints caused by a lack of citizenship. As inheritors of Taiwanese passports in Saudi Arabia, but without a connection to the island country itself, Aisha's children were what she termed 'international vagrants (*guoji youmin* 國際游民)'. The family's emotional attachment to Mecca and Medina could not solve the day-to-day problems they faced as non-full citizens of a nation-state. Because they are considered foreigners, Aisha's daughters Aliya and Jamila were on an indefinite waitlist for their master's programmes of choice in Jeddah, despite their superb records and acceptances. Although Aisha herself had not visited her hometown and family, she encouraged her daughters to head to China—to accumulate new experiences and explore unseen parts of the world instead of, as she put it, remaining a frog in a well. Aisha knew that in Lanzhou and Linxia, her daughters would be in the care of their relatives, be able to learn proper Mandarin Chinese, and perhaps enrol in advanced degree programmes, instead of wasting the precious years of their twenties.

Notwithstanding their hearts in Mecca and decades of residence in Saudi Arabia, the fact that Aisha and her family members possess neither full citizenship nor a complete sense of belonging to any state reflects the inability of one nation-state to contain the physical and conceptual mobility of Chinese Muslim diasporas. Their ideas of homes are dispersed, blurring the distinction between living and dying in a homeland or foreign lands. In Guangzhou and Lanzhou, Aisha's daughters changed their clothes from the black abaya and niqab that they wore in conservative Ta'if to long shirts, jeans and the colourful headscarves worn by Hui youths in China. When I went with them to the vibrant markets of Guangzhou's Xiaobeilu that sold fake goods, sellers would ask them where they were from. Having been repeated multiple times, their answers were

almost formulaic: they were overseas Chinese (*huaqiao* 華僑) living in Saudi Arabia, born there (*chusheng zai naban* 出生在那邊), whose old home (*laojiao* 老家) was in Gansu. They would occasionally add that they were, in fact, Taiwanese nationals. In the words of their five-year-old brother who had not yet learned Chinese, they were ‘muwalladīn there (*iḥna muwalladīn hunāk*)’, referencing a term for people of mixed ancestry, or those brought up as non-Arabs among Arabs, which literally means ‘raised in the place’. Answering questions on origins or homes has required them to muster referents to diaspora that often lie at the blind spot of nation-based historiographies.

From the other direction, long-term sojourners arriving from China in Saudi Arabia have reformulated interpersonal networks of family, business, and religious education—connections that are intermeshed. While PRC state policies tightened control over the religious sphere in the aftermath of the post-9/11 global war on terror and the growing unrest in Xinjiang, certain forms of mobility and religious activities deemed economically lucrative—and thus legitimate—were condoned and even endorsed, at least until the mid-2010s. These measures included promotion of the halal industry and restaurants within and outside China, the secularization of religious schools into vocational Arabic language institutions, and support for officially designated prayer spots in international trade hubs, most notably Guangzhou and Yiwu. In the interstices of the state’s control and selective backing, streams of Muslim entrepreneurs, translators, students and restaurateurs in China travelled domestically and internationally, enrolling in religious educational curriculum or setting up private businesses, sometimes becoming employees of state-owned enterprises along the way.⁷⁰ Gulf destinations such as Dubai, Mecca, and Medina offer both religious education and commercial prospects, while also guaranteeing the safe practice of Islam.

The two-way returns between China and the Gulf have stimulated formulations of new relations between the older diaspora community in the Hejaz and newly arrived entrepreneurs and students. Zahra and her husband Abu Faisal came to Ta’if from Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province in the early 2000s. Introduced to me by an IT professor in Ta’if University whose father had come from Qinghai in the mid-twentieth century, Abu Faisal greeted me in Saudi attire and started conversing with the rest of the guests in lightly accented Arabic. The couple had been running a Chinese restaurant in Ta’if for more than a decade. Their youngest son had been a chef at a five-star hotel in Guangzhou, and the eldest son was preparing to open a branch of the restaurant in Jeddah.

After more than ten years in Ta’if, Zahra’s family was in the middle ground between China and Saudi Arabia. While Xining remained their ultimate home, their livelihoods

⁷⁰Biao and Ma, ‘Mobility assemblage and the return of Islam in Southeast China’. Wai-Yip Ho, ‘Mobilizing the Muslim minority for China’s development: Hui Muslims, ethnic relations and Sino-Arab connections’, *Journal of Comparative Asian Development*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2013, pp. 84–112. Matthew S. Erie, *China and Islam: The Prophet, the party, and law* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 173–219. Cross-border commerce for peddlers was also selectively encouraged in Xinjiang in the 1980s and 90s as export channels to the Soviet Union (and later Central Asian republics). See Gaye Christoffersen, ‘Xinjiang and the great Islamic circle: The impact of transnational forces on Chinese regional economic planning’, *The China Quarterly*, no. 133, 1993, pp. 130–151; Laruelle Marlène and Sébastien Peyrouse, ‘Cross-border minorities as cultural and economic mediators between China and Central Asia’, *China & Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2009, pp. 93–119.

were now based in Ta'if and its vicinity. Zahra's eldest son was married to a third-generation Saudi-Chinese woman. His mother-in-law, though born and raised in Ta'if and possessing Saudi citizenship, had wanted a partner from China for her daughter, in hopes of continuing the family heritage that might otherwise be forgotten. Zahra, while residing in Ta'if, reunited with her extended family in China through the latter's pilgrimages to Mecca.

Yaqoub, who had spent more than five decades in Saudi Arabia after escaping from Xunhua in Qinghai Province in the late 1950s, also considered marrying his youngest daughter to a partner from China. He decided against it, however, preferring to keep her near rather than increase the chances of her permanently settling in China. Instead, she was to be married to a 'Bukhārī' or Central Asian Saudi national, whose family her sister had got to know at her workplace, and then accompany him to Australia as he pursued a PhD. She would attempt to enrol in a master's programme, if her visa issues in Australia—as a Taiwanese national residing in Saudi Arabia—could be resolved.

While he did not forge kinship relations with incoming sojourners from China, Yaqoub made a return trip to Qinghai in 2015 thanks to his acquaintance with entrepreneurs from Xunhua in Qinghai Province who had done business in the Gulf since the early 2000s. I met two of the traders at the breakfast buffet that followed a gender-segregated overnight engagement party for Yaqoub's daughter. The talkative and down-to-earth Yusuf graduated from Medina's Islamic University in the mid-1990s, while his business partner had studied in Cairo's al-Azhar University.

The ties of a shared home region, together with business necessities, bound Yaqoub and Yusuf. They met when Yusuf came to Medina as a student. Like many Chinese Muslim graduates of the Islamic University in Medina, Yusuf's career involved long-distance trade. In Jeddah, his company was involved in the wholesale trade in the white robes worn by Saudi males, produced in Xunhua and shipped in containers via Shenzhen. Yusuf and his partner spent nine years in Dubai, where private merchants, state-owned enterprises, and tech companies from China have been a growing presence for the past decade.⁷¹ With Dubai as a base, they moved between Jeddah, Mecca, and Medina for business. Yaqoub's eldest daughter, who had Saudi citizenship, served as the company's Saudi sponsor, in accordance with the requirements of the *kafala* system in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf, which since the 1960s has made every foreign worker find and pay a Saudi citizen or company as a sponsor and mediator of relations with the government. While the system has been portrayed as a formidable exclusionary force, it has also worked to build new relations.⁷² As Yusuf explained, designating Yaqoub's daughter as the sponsor was not only necessary for the company's operations, but also provided steady monthly wages for her family.

Travel and sojourns can change previously held fantasies about destinations. Besides prompting him to forge commercial networks and tap into existing diaspora communities in Saudi Arabia, Yusuf's studies at Medina's Islamic University made him

⁷¹Yuting Wang, *Chinese in Dubai: Money, pride, and soul-searching* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

⁷²For a refreshing take on *kafala* as an 'inclusionary assemblage' that goes beyond the conventional binary of ethnocentric citizens and victimized non-citizens, see Neha Vora and Natalie Koch, 'Everyday inclusions: Rethinking ethnocracy, Kafala, and belonging in the Arabian Peninsula', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2015, pp. 540–552.

critical of the ideological basis of Saudi society that had led to the University's founding. Yusuf could not comprehend the fact that Yaqoub, despite living in Saudi Arabia for almost 60 years, was not a citizen. Yusuf was familiar with Yaqoub's story of escape from a small town in Xunhua in Qinghai Province, his nostalgia for home during long years of residence in Saudi Arabia, and the difficulties of being stateless. As Yusuf saw it, Saudi Arabia claimed to value universal religion, but these words were merely superficial. During his long-term stay in Medina, he frequently heard stories from colleagues whose families had financial difficulties, even more, he felt, than people in China. This stood in stark contrast to the popular image of the country's wealth, which Yusuf saw as confined to the royal family. He was preparing to leave Saudi Arabia, following its economic slowdown since the steep fall in oil prices in 2014.

Multiple factors inform individual choices. As Yusuf was about to close down his company's operations in Saudi Arabia, Sulaymān, another Islamic University graduate from Gansu Province, was involved in religious propagation. After graduating in 2002, Sulaymān chose to wear the Saudi white robe and work for a missionary organization in Ta'if. I was introduced to him by Yaqoub's nephew, a courteous religious policeman (*muawwa'*) who described Sulaymān as a sheikh knowledgeable about both China and Islam. Sulaymān gifted me Chinese-language pamphlets on Islam and a Korean translation of the Quran. His target population was those arriving from China and the larger East Asian region.

Upon arriving in Medina in the 1990s, Sulaymān connected with a grand-uncle in Ta'if whom he had never met, and lived with him for a decade until his passing in 2006. Over meals, the grand-uncle told him of the hardships he had suffered, how he strove to make a living by sewing skull caps. Having been classified as a bourgeois class enemy in the 1950s, he escaped from Gansu through Sichuan, Tibet, the Himalayas to Nepal and India, arriving in Mecca penniless. Mecca's soaring rents prompted him to move to Ta'if. Like many other refugees from China who arrived in Mecca during that period, Suleiman's grand-uncle was not a citizen. His only family was his much younger wife, whom he had met in Nepal and who came with him to Mecca. Although they had a small store in Ta'if, they did not prosper. After the passing of his granduncle, Sulaymān stayed on in Ta'if to work at the missionary institution that provided him a residency permit. The job was not too arduous, requiring him to work in the morning and afternoon; the salary was reasonable, and the location let him take care of the grand-aunt who had no other family in a place where life was hard for women without male guardians. Moreover, Sulaymān reminded me, a prayer in Medina equalled 1000 prayers at home, and that in Mecca 10,000 times.

As we see from the itineraries of individuals and families between the Hejaz and China since 1979, reknitting ties with distant homes from their base, whether China or Saudi Arabia, gave diasporas the social capital needed to break out of the constraints they faced as foreigners or ethnic minorities. Conceptual identification with Mecca, interpreted as a universal homeland, provided those who decided to stay on in the Hejaz a language of embedment in an otherwise unfamiliar society. Interweaving long-distance ties was also a process of rediscovering the self, acknowledging the perpetual state of travel between multiple home places as a defining pillar of one's life and identity.

At the same time, the homecomings of multi-generational diaspora communities are ambivalent. Unfolding over long passages of time, their journeys home are different from pre-arranged, predictable travel in which one controls the itinerary and knows where the journey will end. While some reconnect with previously unknown relatives in their grandparents' hometowns, others may find the home places they grew up hearing about no longer exist or may simply not be motivated to make a strenuous visit to an unfamiliar place. In other instances, connections with distant home places are better left forgotten. Homecoming thus may mean returns to multiple, alternative centres rather than a single location. It may, in the end, remain unrealized.

The youth of the Sino-Saudi community I encountered, whose grandparents had migrated to the Hejaz decades ago, had mixed dispositions toward their families' connections with faraway homes. Sara, a jubilant college student who lives in a girls' dormitory in Jeddah, knows that her family on her father's side came from Bafang, a part of Linxia where mosques and Sufi shrines are clustered. As a holder of Saudi citizenship, she receives a monthly stipend from the university. Her grandmother in Ta'if speaks broken Arabic and a bit of Chinese that Sara does not understand, she tells me. Her mother, on the other hand, was born in Ta'if, an English teacher whose father came from Pakistan to Ta'if as a doctor some 60 years ago. Yet Sara's interests in the east lie in Korean popular culture and language, not where her grandparents came from. To her, I represented an intriguing epitome of that culture. She enthusiastically took my number at a wedding and met me again at a mall in Jeddah. Less than a ten-minute drive from her dormitory, going to the mall was an adventure for her. By the end of the rendezvous, she told me with anxious excitement that this was the first time she'd been out alone without her brother or sister or permission from her father in Ta'if. I am her first foreign friend, she added. She hopes to travel to Korea and elsewhere one day. At the end of the outing, she called one of the drivers at the dormitory, most of whom were long-term employees from different parts of India, and waved me goodbye.

Sara's father, born and raised in Ta'if, is clear about why he restricts his daughter's travels. The sociopolitical status of women in Saudi Arabia and its regulation, as Madawi al-Rasheed has elucidated, has been shaped by the political project of 'religious' nationalism that, by projecting the revivalist movement of the Wahhābiyyah as the basis for consolidating a political community, has 'constructed women into icons for the authenticity of the nation and its compliance with God's law'.⁷³ While it brings tribes under check, the state also retains a 'tribal ethos, which, among other things, keeps women in a patriarchal relationship under the authority of male relatives'.⁷⁴

Sara's father's restrictions have an aspect of performativity—enabling the family to act as full parts of a country that is now their sole home. During our encounter in Ta'if, he asked me if I study anthropology or history. He, he informed me, studied sociology. What are the differences that I observe between the Chinese community in Saudi Arabia and others around the world? he asked. He stressed the cultural intermixing that occurs in different places—that when cultures mix, they create something new. When people move and settle, they inevitably adapt to the environment and adopt a new culture. That is the reason, he continued, for the differences between Chinese

⁷³Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A most masculine state: Gender, politics and religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 17.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, p. 5.

communities in different places, even when they are Muslims. He pointed out that Chinese Muslims in America are very different from those in Saudi Arabia, for example. As settlers in Saudi Arabia, he implied, his family needs to abide by its social norms.

Others in Sara's parents' generation live with an acute sense of loss of the past and anxiety about further forgetting. Over the decades of post-Second World War nation-building in Saudi Arabia, diaspora populations have faced the pressure to erase the non-Arab roots and routes of their forefathers. As holders of Saudi citizenship, they are not legally affected by Saudization policies, but they have not always wanted to embrace their families' distant origins.⁷⁵

Hanifa, whom I met at an Eid celebration gathering in Jeddah, shared her feeling that her generation 'knows nothing'. Her grandfather taught near Haram after coming from China, and her father who came with him spoke classical and colloquial Chinese languages in addition to eloquent Arabic. She, on the other hand, knows she has relatives in China but is clueless about who they are or their whereabouts. Her father passed away several years ago. 'We are in between Saudi and China, and are neither Saudi nor Chinese', she told me. 'When we go to China, they would say we are not Chinese, that we don't look like Chinese. In Saudi Arabia, people would say we are not Saudi, even if we have Saudi documents and citizenship. So, we wonder if we are Saudi, or Chinese, Saudi Chinese, or I don't know what (*mā adrīsh*)', she laughed. The real loss, she feels, is that of language. Attending Saudi public schools compounded the difficulty of retaining languages spoken at home. She hopes to find a Chinese school in Jeddah to send her children to. One of her daughters, though, has married a 'Saudi man' and now lives in Oregon in the USA. There is no way to tell where her daughter's path will take her.

The first generation of settlers in the Hejaz from different parts of China experienced parts of both worlds, not fully fitting into the category of a single place or nation. Their lives were lived across multiple sites—in the liminal, intermediary spaces of travel and exile mediated by Mecca. As the elderly among the community pass away, generations without tangible connections to China witness their pasts fading. Should these pasts be remembered at all? If so, how? These questions do not always have clear answers, even within a family. Caught between the urge to inscribe and transmit histories of their predecessors and the explicit disconnect with such pasts—or the preference that they be forgotten—diaspora communities cannot easily decide how to claim multiple homes, let alone one. With everywhere and nowhere to call home, their returns or decisions not to return remain potentials to be uncovered.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to narrate alternative histories of Chinese Muslims who are usually viewed within the context of the territorial Chinese nation-state and to shed light on Mecca as a space of inter-Asian convergences. Using Mecca as a lens, it has traced the multi-directional mobility of Chinese Muslim pilgrims, exiles, refugees, students, and more recently, merchants and restaurateurs over the course of the twentieth and

⁷⁵These dynamics for Faṭānī /Jāwī communities in Mecca are illuminated in Muhammad Arafat Bin Mohamad, 'Be-longing: Fatanis in Makkah and Jawi'.

early twenty-first centuries. World politics and wars exerted both upending and re-routing force—creating waves of refugees and instigating intermittent internationalist religious diplomacy along the *hajj* routes on the one hand, while blocking channels of transnational movements on the other. While these events changed according to circumstance, invariable factors also mediated the flows of Chinese Muslim individuals over generations: the regularity of the *hajj*, communal institutions of gathering sustained by transfers of donations, and imageries of distant places as home places one could return to.

Combining textual sources of different genres and oral interviews revealed a consistent pattern whereby the *hajj* to Mecca provided a means of escape for exiles and refugees fleeing wars and social turmoil that wreaked havoc in China and Altishahr/Xinjiang throughout the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. The pilgrimage to Mecca thus needs to be seen not only through the lens of fulfilment of religious obligation or a channel of Islamic political activism and diplomacy, but as a mediator of multi-generational migrations that formed diaspora communities in the Hejaz that kept imagined or real ties with homes elsewhere. Furthermore, trans-regional mobilities created and were sustained by infrastructures grounded in specific places. Consistent flows of pilgrims, sojourners, and exiles built communal institutions that offered accommodation, and like *huiguan* for migrant groups in China or Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, provided relief and a sense of solidarity. For both *huiguan* and *waqf* institutions in Mecca, mobilities led to the making of institutions that, in turn, reinforced trans-regional connections.

Dwellings and settlements between China and Saudi Arabia accompanied conceptions of home understood as dispersed places. Returns in this sense could be journeys to multiple locales rather than a singular centre, whether to the Arabian Peninsula conceived of as a universally accessible refuge or to the old home places in mainland China. Imagined connections with distant homes could offer new openings, most prominently in the post-Cold War period. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Chinese Muslims who had been based in Saudi Arabia and the PRC forged renewed ties of kinship, commerce, and scholarship that served as alternative sources of social capital for both sides, especially the second- and third-generation Chinese Muslim diasporas in Saudi Arabia who were not full citizens of any nation-state. At the same time, ideals of dispersed homes did not materialize seamlessly. Everyday blockages caused by passports and identity papers—or lack thereof—show that conceptions of dual homelands do not always synchronize with legal infrastructures of the nation-state that define a home through political membership. Even with citizenship papers, majoritarian nationalism based on ethnicity or genealogy, or selective familiarity with social and linguistic norms could turn understandings of home from ‘everywhere’ to ‘nowhere’.

Recognizing the patterns and rhythms of mobility wrought with openings and tensions, requires disrupting linear and truncated time and employing moving parts rather than stable concepts such as the nation and ethnicity as categories of analysis. By examining overlapping Chinese Muslim networks, I have suggested that Mecca needs to be seen beyond the viewpoints of empire, nation-state, industrial transport, and Islamist imaginaries—as important as they are. It must also be seen from the vantage points of multi-generational diasporas that have converged in and been dispersed from the city. This approach not only diversifies understandings of the Hejaz and Saudi

Arabia as inter-Asian spaces where external circulations have constantly moved in and out, but also unbinds the interlocked relationship between the majoritarian state and the ethnic or religious minority in China and elsewhere. Examining existing but under-recognized historical and ethnographic data collected from mobile individuals sheds new light on a seemingly familiar place and people.

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