



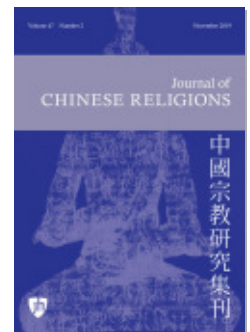
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*Chinese Ways of Being Muslim: Negotiating Ethnicity and
Religiosity in Indonesia* by Hew Wai Weng (review)

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There are today about 3–5 million ethnic Chinese Indonesians, 1.5–2 percent of the total population of the predominantly Muslim country. Among the total population of Chinese descent across the archipelago, Chinese Muslims number around 50,000, or 1.6 percent of ethnic Chinese. Most of these Chinese Muslims today are converts, rather than Hui Muslims. With this background, Indonesia has witnessed diverse and fluid expressions and practices of being Chinese and Muslim.

Chinese Ways of Being Muslim thus offers a welcome contribution to the development of comparative Chinese and Muslim studies. Based on fieldwork undertaken in 2008 and 2009, it seeks to examine how and under what conditions ethnicity and religiosity are performed and negotiated in diverse ways. The author has explored various perspectives, people, organizations, and practices, associated with being Chinese and Muslim in contemporary Indonesia. There are a number of interesting theoretical concepts employed, although specialist and general readers may wish for an underlying theme tying the chapters together more tightly. A focus on one or two concepts such as “religious hybridization” (instead of “religious syncretism” for instance) and ethnicity in flux (instead of “fixed ethnicity”), could have developed the theoretical analysis of the book more deeply.

Chapter 1 introduces this ethnographic research on Chinese Muslims’ identity formation, cultural diversity, and religious cosmopolitanism. Chapter 2 examines the reconstruction of Chinese Muslim histories in different time periods characterized by distinct but not necessarily separate trajectories. According to local histories, Chinese Muslims have resided in Indonesia at least since the fifteenth century. In this pre-colonial period, Chinese Muslims created a hybrid culture reflected in things such as mosque architecture. In the colonial period, the Dutch created a Chinese minority, classed as “foreign orientals,” and distinguished from the natives. Sino-Javanese Muslim culture seemed to have declined due to colonial discouragement. In the later part of the colonial period, from the 1890s to the 1945 independence, Chinese, including Muslims, began to organize themselves. In the era of Soekarno (1945–1967), several Chinese Muslims reached cabinet posts. In the era of Soeharto (1965–1998), Chinese had become largely assimilated and ethnic expressions were banned. The era after 1998 witnessed a resurgence of Chinese, and Chinese Muslim, culture. The Chinese Muslims’ re-articulation of history is regarded as a “self-strategic essentialising which should be differentiated from an identity essentialisation and control by the state,” a process which “is culturally and politically empowering” (p. 76). But how might this act of essentializing and empowerment among the Chinese be analytically linked to the way in which religious hybridization and ethnicity in flux work? Unfortunately, this is never addressed.

Chapter 3 argues that Chinese-style mosques, particularly the Cheng Hoo Mosque 鄭和清真寺, represent a “cosmopolitan space envisaged in marginality,” borrowing Bhabha’s concept (p. 199). The pagoda-like mosque and its minarets, the dominance of red, green, and yellow colors, and the handbooks in Chinese as well as other languages are some of the striking elements of Chineseness blended with some of the characteristics of mosque architecture quite common in other parts of Indonesia. This translocality is mixed with Javanese elements, quite different from the Chinese Islamic center in Jakarta which mainly borrows a Moorish design from Spain. In the complex of the Cheng Hoo Mosque, Chinese and non-Chinese, Muslims and non-Muslims also participate in Mandarin classes, *qigong* 氣功, and dancing courses. This translocal and

multicultural physical space would sustain the general argument of religious hybridization and ethnicity in flux.

In chapter 4, the author uses the concept of the hybrid performance in discussing Chinese Muslim preachers, alongside the concept of commodification of religion, which he sees as “not necessarily weakening, but transforming faith” (p. 123). Muslim preaching also is a case of “inclusive Chineseness” (p. 152). Chinese culture is expressed not in terms of ethnic exclusivity but in terms of a widely accepted Indonesian culture. Chinese converts to Islam who have become preachers come from varying backgrounds and promote their unique forms of faith through performance in their own Chinese language, dialect, and dress. These preachers, however, do not become necessarily “progressive” in their religious understanding. They do not “break down ethnic stereotypes and pluralise the substance of religious discourse.” (p. 158). How the notion of religious conservatism goes hand in hand with the notion of religious hybridization is something that should have been addressed.

Chapter 4 studies Chinese Muslim organizations and political parties in order to further examine the diverse and dynamic ways of being Chinese and Muslim, some of which are concerned with preaching and others with assimilation. The *Muslim Tionghoa dan Keluarga* (MUSTIKA, Chinese Muslims and Families), for example, was more like a religious study group, founded by Chinese Muslim activists who come from diverse backgrounds. One of the MUSTIKA founders, Syarif Tanudjaja was a member of the traditionalist Nahdlatul ‘Ulama, also included were a former member of the modernist Muhammadiyah, a former member of the Islamist Justice Party (Partai Keadilan), a former leader of the assimilationist Karim Oei Foundation, and one of the leaders of the Indonesian Chinese Muslim Association (PITI). Besides the MUSTIKA, a foundation called the Haji Muhammad Cheng Ho Foundation, founded in 1995, has received funding from both Chinese Muslims and non-Muslims. The organization is connected to other Chinese organizations, religious scholars, and government officials. The founder Bambang Sujanto’s Muslim identity has helped his business, a case indicating the mixture of economic interests and religious piety. These and other organizations have focused on either assimilation through Islam, that is to say, Chinese become Muslims as a way of becoming assimilated with the mainstream culture, or preaching Islam through cultural approaches, that is, Chinese preachers invite people to learn about Islam without being concerned about assimilation to the mainstream culture. Some people see the two priorities as not mutually exclusive. Still others prefer to join either Islamist or religiously neutral political parties. The multiple affiliations of Chinese Muslims suggest the extent to which ethnicity in flux operates.

In chapter 5, the author focuses on the Chinese New Year celebrations (locally called *imlek*) to discuss the contestation of meanings about the tradition among the Chinese Muslims. The author argues against the use of “religious syncretism” as a label, but instead uses “religious hybridization” to characterize a contested process shaped by the interaction between texts, contexts, and practices. He also shows how the people make distinctions between religion and culture (to which the Chinese New Year celebrations particularly belong), as a mechanism for addressing the contested tradition. The author can demonstrate how Chinese Muslims’ celebration of the Imlek presents the case of religious hybridization rather than syncretism.

Chapter 6 tells stories of Chinese conversion to Islam in contemporary Indonesia, and offers the concept of “flexible piety” (p. 229), suggesting adjustments of the understanding and practice of Islam according to contexts. Political, economic, religious, and cultural factors play different roles in the different stories and religiosity can shift

according to shifting interests and contexts. The way in which the idea of “flexible piety” is related to the idea of “religious hybridization” would have been an interesting discussion. At the same time, the manner of being ethnic Chinese is not fixed (hence, “ethnicity in flux”, p. 254). But a critical question should be asked: how fluid is ethnicity in comparison to religion? Although both being Chinese and being Muslim change, one’s ethnicity seems to be more fixed than religiosity: one is born Chinese but chooses to be Muslim.

In the conclusion, the author points to several important findings. One finding suggests that there is a shift from being a double minority to being bridge builders between non-Muslim Chinese and non-Chinese Muslim Indonesians. The author also suggests that the Chinese-style mosques are “the most successful and concrete expression of Chinese Muslim culture in Indonesia today” (p. 266), and yet they reveal “a limited kind of cosmopolitan Islam and inclusive Chineseness” (p. 270). The author also argues that the preachers “neither offer a critical understanding of Islam nor pluralise the religious debates in Indonesia” (p. 268), although the chapters do not discuss how the diverse religious debates occur in intellectual circles in Indonesia. The author also maintains that the inclusivity of Chinese Muslim culture does not necessarily lead to “the decline of class differences, racial inequality, and religious conservatism” (p. 271). These issues, while important, are not adequately addressed in the chapters.

As we read the chapters, other questions may be asked. The author does not address the question why many Chinese, including Muslims, especially in the post-New Order period, refused to use the term “*Cina*” but used *Tionghoa* instead. The author’s use of only “Chinese” throughout the cases does not show adequately some nuances of the politics behind the language. *Tionghoa* is a transliteration of the Chinese *Zhonghua* 中華, a standard Chinese name for “China,” but the connotation is different. Many Chinese in post-1998 Indonesia do not want to be tied to the negative stereotypes associated with “*Cina*” during the Soeharto’s era and before. The term *Tionghoa* sounded more neutral than the term *Cina*. The book also conflates the two concepts “race” and “ethnicity” where many Indonesians would see the terms *suku* and *ras* as being not always identical. Readers may also wonder how Chinese Muslims in Indonesia experience similar or different issues and predicaments concerning *pribumi* versus *non-pribumi* (native versus non-native) compared with Chinese Buddhists, Christians, and Confucians in Indonesia and with Chinese Muslims in Malaysia or Singapore. Since colonial times, being Chinese has become associated with being non-native, leading to prejudice and discrimination at public offices, universities, and companies, despite being no less Indonesian than the non-Chinese Indonesians.

Despite containing several typos, such as misspelling of names (“Mahruf Amin,” p. 214, instead of “Ma’ruf Amin”) and Arabic transliterations, such as “*isnyaallah*” [note 23, p. 33], instead of “*insyallah*”), this book is a fine work for students and scholars interested in the study of Indonesian Islam, Chinese identities, Southeast Asian religions and cultures, and for anyone examining the broader problem of inter-sectionality of ethnicity and religion.

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