

Making 'new' Muslim places in urban Malaysia and Indonesia¹

My research in 2013 brought me to various cities in Malaysia and Indonesia. It gave me the opportunity to visit a multitude of interesting venues, ranging from sacred places (Chinese-style mosques), to eating places (Chinese halal restaurants), retail places (shopping malls and Islamic boutiques) and living places (Muslim gated communities), and led me to develop a new research project in which I will study Muslim identities and aspirations in contemporary societies, by examining the constructions of place, claims on space and the architecture of built forms.

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BY STUDYING the production and consumption of 'new' Muslim places, this research aims to provide fresh ways of thinking about Islam, and more specifically, of thinking about Muslims and their relations to the challenges of urbanisation, modernity and plurality in contemporary Malaysia and Indonesia. It will examine how and under what conditions, religious movements transform urbanity and, vice versa, how urban space triggers religious innovations. Yet, it does not see Islam as the only parameter to understand such dynamics, but also takes other aspects into consideration such as consumer culture, ethnic interaction, political contestation and economic development.

While this research engages with both current scholarships of space and place, it highlights the material dimensions of spatial formation, by looking at places such as Chinese-style mosques, halal restaurants, Muslim gated communities and Muslim websites. Although they do not have a physical structure, online spaces entail material sensibilities represented by words and images. Instead of conventional Muslim places, such as mosques (in this case, non-Chinese style), religious schools and shrines, this study emphasises the development of new practices and the formation of new ideas, as reflected in the making of new places I describe below.

Promoting inclusive Islam: Chinese-style mosques

This project builds upon my ongoing work, 'Translocal and Cosmopolitan Islam: Chinese-style Mosques in Malaysia and Indonesia'. Since 2000, at least ten Chinese-style mosques were built in Malaysia and Indonesia, clearly making them a translocal phenomenon. Inspired by the architectural design of old mosques in mainland China, different actors have built Chinese-style mosques in various cities in both Malaysia and Indonesia to preach the universality of Islam, as well as to show the compatibility between Islam and Chineseness.

Yet there are also different motivations behind the construction of each mosque. For instance, the Kelantan Beijing Mosque was sponsored by an Islamic party in Malaysia to promote an inclusive image of the party, while the Surabaya Cheng Hoo Mosque was established by the Indonesian Chinese Muslim Association to manifest a distinctive representation of Chinese Muslim cultural identity. In addition, the activities in the mosques are localized: the sermons are conducted in Malay or Indonesian, and most of the congregation members are non-Chinese Muslims. These mosques have also been promoted as sites for religious tourism and symbols of religious inclusivity.

Culinary *Dakwah*: Chinese halal restaurants

The research will be extended to include places such as Chinese halal restaurants and Muslim gated communities. In the last ten years, the number of Chinese halal restaurants in Malaysia has mushroomed. Such restaurants attract many Malay Muslim middle-class clients in urban Malaysia. Chinese converts are key players in the Chinese halal food market. They see their restaurants as eating places that can promote ethnic interaction and facilitate religious preaching. Indeed, like Chinese-style mosques, Chinese halal restaurants are inclusive places where both Chinese and non-Chinese, Muslims and non-Muslims can gather.

Established in about 2006, the Mohammad Chan Halal Restaurant and the Sharin Low Seafood Restaurant are two of the most successful cases. As of 2012, there were eight

branches of the Mohammad Chan Restaurant and seventeen of the Sharin Low Restaurant in Malaysia. Notably, the Sharin Low Restaurant has expanded its business into Indonesia, where it launched a branch in Jakarta in 2012, and is planning to open another one in Bali by the end of 2013. Besides Chinese converts, Hui Muslims from mainland China have also recently opened restaurants in both countries. The successful stories of Chinese-style mosques and halal restaurants reflect a growing trend of accommodating Chinese cultural elements in the Islamic preaching.

Creating heaven on earth: Muslim gated communities and Islamic cities

In contrast to halal restaurants, Muslim gated communities are exclusively Muslim spaces, specifically designed for pious Muslims (regardless their ethnicities). In the last few years,



Top: A panoramic view of the Beijing Mosque, a Chinese-style mosque in Kelantan, Malaysia

Below left: Bukit Az-Zikra, a Muslim housing cluster in Sentul, outskirts of Jakarta, Indonesia.

Below right: A geometric monument with a giant 'Quran'; the main roundabout in the city centre of 'Islamic City' Kota Bharu.

All photos courtesy of the Author.

there are increasing numbers of Muslim gated communities surrounding Jakarta, as a result of growing Islamic piety and market economy. These housing complexes offer a 'modern, green and Islamic' living environment to young middle-class Muslim families in urban Indonesia; thus, ideal sites to investigate how religiosity and modernity are negotiated by various Muslim actors in a real and everyday setting.

Villa Ilhami, Bumi Darussalam and Orchid Realty (Organization of Cyber Housing and Islamic Development) are three main property developers for Islamic housing (*Perumahan Islam*) in contemporary Indonesia. Aiming to "create heaven on earth", each housing cluster of Bumi Darussalam has its own mosque, in which its residents are encouraged to participate in various religious classes and activities. Meanwhile, Orchid Realty claims to be "Indonesia's first Islamic property developer" and considers its business to be a form of 'economic jihad'. Situated in Sentul, on the outskirts of Jakarta, Bukit Az-Zikra is another remarkable Muslim housing cluster. It has named its streets in Arabic and has adopted 'Islamic' features for its houses. Moreover, there are billboards in Bukit Az-Zikra, stating that its residents should perform prayers, wear Islamic attires and not smoke. Not surprisingly, many of the developers and residents of these Islamic housing areas are Muslims associated with Islamic parties and organisations.

There are not only efforts to 'Islamicise' housing areas, but also attempts to 'Islamicise' cities in Malaysia and Indonesia. Recently, Kota Bharu in Malaysia (Kelantan) and Bogor in Indonesia proclaimed themselves as 'Islamic city' and 'Halal city'. Kota Bharu's municipal government now requires all new commercial buildings to adopt 'Islamic architecture' and it has implemented a few sharia-influenced by-laws to police the morality of its residents. In terms of economic planning, the Kelantan state government has proposed the usage of *dinar* (Islamic currency), the development of a halal economy and the idea to build a palm island, mimicking the one in Dubai (not yet implemented). Meanwhile, the Bogor municipal government has planned to ban the slaughtering of pigs and limit the selling of pork in the city.

From digital *Dakwah* to street *Dakwah*

In recent years, Muslim religiosity in Malaysia and Indonesia is not only negotiated in various physical places (from mosques to shopping malls), but also contested in numerous cyber spaces (from blogosphere to Facebook). The digital world facilitates the spread and discussion of religious knowledge and forms of practice among Muslims, without encountering a physical place of worship, or a religious scholar. Various Muslim activists, including Chinese converts, have creatively used various types of new media to conduct *dakwah* (dissemination of Islamic messages), which some of them called 'digital *dakwah*'.

Cyber spaces are important places where many Chinese Muslims share their conversion experiences, express their ethno-religious identities, and spread Islamic messages to non-Muslim audiences. The internet not only connects Chinese converts who are minorities in both Malaysia and Indonesia, but also links them to Hui Muslims in China, and Muslim converts in the West; this might contribute to a new form of online translocal *ummah* network (see <http://www.mualaf.com>, <http://www.revertedmuslim.blogspot.de> and <http://www.onenur.net>). Unlike conventional *dakwah* activities, which aim to strengthen the faith of Muslims, Chinese Muslims' digital *dakwah* aims to universalise Islam and invite non-Muslims to get closer to the Islamic faith. In addition to 'digital *dakwah*', Chinese Muslims also conduct 'street *dakwah*': a new phenomenon in Malaysia, in which Muslims (both Malay and Chinese) take their faith to the streets in urban centres and share their religion with non-Muslims. Some Muslim individuals and groups are involved in both forms of *dakwah*, leading us to speculate about the ways in which the two are related. How, for example, does the intersection of new media and urban spaces contribute to new forms of religious activities?

Conclusion

From inclusive Chinese-style mosques to exclusive Muslim housing clusters, we witness placemaking by different Muslim actors, at numerous sites, in contemporary urban Malaysia and Indonesia. These places are sites of negotiation between Islamic movements and consumer culture, between religious piety and urban lifestyle; they are sites of interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, and between Muslims with different backgrounds. On the one hand, there is a growing demand for diversity within Islamic expressions among the urban Muslim middleclass. They do not want to see all the mosques built in a similar pan-Islamic architecture, thus they support the construction of Chinese-style mosques; they do not want to just eat Malay food, thus they visit Chinese halal restaurants. On the other hand, there is also an increased desire to mix religious messages with modern ideas, to forge an 'Islamic way of modern living', by building Islamic gated communities and Islamic cities. Even though this 'Islamic way of modern living' adopts modern infrastructure and ideas, it is often accompanied by strict regulations, religious segregation and sometimes moral policing, which might alienate non-Muslims and non-conformist Muslims.

What are the translocal flows, national politics and local dynamics behind the making of various Muslim places? Who are the producers and consumers of these places? What do these places tell us about Muslim piety and urban politics? How do these places engage with existing religious plurality and cultural diversity in Malaysia and Indonesia? A study of urban Muslim places could provide us with deeper insights into the multifaceted and intertwined processes of 'Islamisation' and urbanisation in contemporary Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as the inclusionary possibilities and limitations of these processes of placemaking. These places could also tell us how and under what conditions, religious motivations, political mobilizations and market considerations converge in urban settings.

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Note

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