

In Search of the Chinese Muslim Diaspora

Research >
China

The voluminous amount of literature on the Chinese labourers' emigration, the so-called "coolie trade", never paid much attention to one of its smallest components: the Chinese Muslims (Hui). It should not be so surprising to find some Muslims among Chinese labourers, as there were communities of Muslims living in most of the regions where recruitment took place. The puzzling element, however, is that Chinese Muslims seem to have been part of this emigration process for only a very short period of time, specifically during the decade prior to the First World War.

By Eric Germain

The reason appears to have been directly linked with the socio-political situation of China at that moment. If we consider the recruitment scheme for the Transvaal gold mines, it was the Russo-Japanese War that necessitated the changes in emigration flux from Guangdong to the Northern provinces. In fact, for the first time, labourers were not only Cantonese but also Northern Chinese from Shandong, Manchuria, and Henan.

While visiting England on an ESF Asia Committee travel grant, I visited the British Library and the Newspaper Library in London, and the Bodleian Library in Oxford, as well as had contacts

with academics from the SOAS and Oxford University. I found several documents referring to Chinese Muslims working in South Africa. There were no more than one-hundred and they all probably returned to China in 1910 when their contract's ended, as did most of the 60,000 Chinese labourers. The link between the recruitment of Northern Chinese and the greater occurrence of Muslims among Chinese labourers is confirmed by figures from German colonies which show that many of the Chinese were also Shandong. Furthermore, it is known that Chinese Muslims were working in the German territories of the Pacific Ocean, such as Kaiser Wilhelm'sland (German New-Guinea) and the Samoan islands.

Research on the Muslim component of the Chinese Diaspora as been quite time consuming as information is scarce and dispersed throughout a vast amount of documentation. It became necessary to enlarge the scope of the research to all Chinese Muslims who were living or travelling overseas in the first half of the twentieth century. For that purpose, one type of relevant source material is the Missionary literature, Christian as well as Muslim. Indeed, Muslim newspapers with circulations in European colonies at the beginning of the twentieth century were very concerned with the fate of co-religionists facing similar problems in other lands. Of particular interest is the literature issued by the two oldest

Mosques in England, located near London in Liverpool and Woking. Newspapers issued there emphasized the need to propagate Islam and often referred to the "exotic" nationalities which gathered in their Mosques as a means of showing the universality of Islam. Mosques throughout the British Empire welcomed Muslim visitors and I found reports of some Chinese individuals attending Eid celebrations; although, in those cases, it is difficult to ascertain whether those people were really "Chinese" and not Indian traders living in Hong Kong and Shanghai. If they did, in fact, turn out to be Chinese, what were they doing there? There were, for example, no less than 450 Chinese students in Great Britain in 1930, some Muslims probably numbering among them (especially those studying in military academies), but I do not know if and how they associated with local Muslim communities.

Another group interested in the diversity of religious affiliations of Chinese overseas' communities were the Chris-

tian missionaries. In China, it was widely believed that Muslims, being already monotheists, were more likely to accept the message of the Gospel. But in the areas of immigration, clerics who knew about the existence of "Mohammedans" among Chinese labourers (whose presence was largely ignored by records of Foreign Labour Departments) were rare. Information is thus non-existent at the local level, and most can be found in the statistical surveys published regularly by Missionary Agencies or for Missionary Conferences.

Little by little, then, this research is linking singular experiences in more than twenty countries into a global scheme of migration patterns of the Chinese Muslims at the turn of the twentieth century. <

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The Religious Factor

In Recent Political Transformations in Southeast Asia

During the last few years, Southeast Asia has witnessed far-reaching transformations in the political sphere. Established governments and political systems have been replaced or regions have been conceded larger autonomy, if not independence. Calls for change remain strong. Both as causes and as effects of these transformations and aspirations, Southeast Asia has undergone growing tensions between social classes, ethnic groups, and regions. In many of these processes religion plays a role, yet the importance and nature of the religious factor is often a subject for discussion.

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Southeast Asia

By Andrée Feillard @ Johan Meuleman

As a contribution to this discussion, the authors of this report organized a panel on "The religious factor in recent political transformations in Southeast Asia" at the third EUROSEAS Conference (London, 6 to 8 September 2001). The objective of the panel was to examine the role of conceptions, traditions, organizations, and leaders of various religions and religious communities in transformations such as the Indonesian Reformasi, the conflicts in Aceh, the Moluccas, and East Timor, and the competition for power in Malaysia. One of the main questions addressed was to what extent the religious factor is important, taking a significant place alongside socio-economic and ethnic factors or simply conflicts for the distribution of power and resources? And subsequently what is the relationship between religious factors and those other types of factors in various social and political processes?

Eleven participants from a number of European countries, Indonesia, and Malaysia presented papers relating to Indonesia and Malaysia. Unfortunately, no papers were presented on the democratization process in the Philippines, the Muslim autonomy movements in Thailand and the Philippines, or related questions pertaining to Southeast Asia.

Johan Meuleman presented a paper entitled "From New Order to national disintegration. The religious factor between reality, manipulation, and rationalization", arguing that in many recent conflicts in Indonesia religion has not played a dominant or independent role, but has often been presented so in rationalizations, i.e. pseudo-scientific simplifications. The manipulation of religious sensibilities has been a frequent strategy.

Hans Hägerdal (University of Växjö, Sweden) presented the results of two long series of interviews, concentrating on questions such as globalization, Pancasila (the Indonesian state ideology) and democracy, in a paper entitled "Images of the future: intellectual Muslim views of political pluralism in the aftermath of the Indonesian New Order". He concluded that most Indonesian Muslim intellectuals are remarkably open-minded in their attitude towards modernity, a global world, and the other religious communities, but

that the thirty-odd years of Soeharto's New Order regime continue to have an impact on their ideas.

In a paper on "The religious factor in political concepts during the early stage of Indonesian Reformasi", Mathias Diederich (Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main) showed that, although many parties used Islamic symbols, hardly any presented a concrete proposal referring to Islam in their programmes.

A related theme was addressed in Andrée Feillard's paper "The reappearance of religion as a factor in Indonesian party politics". She offered a critical analysis of a political survey from 1999 by William Liddle and Saiful Mujani and explained that the distinction between *santri* (practising orthodox Muslims), *abangan* (Indonesian Muslims strongly influenced by pre-Islamic spiritual conceptions), traditionalist Muslims, and secularists should be made in a much more refined way than either of the authors mentioned have done and many others still do. She drew attention to the development of a category of "new *santris*", whose political attitudes appear to differ both from their parents and from the older category of *santris*.

In his "Between faith and politics. The rise of the Laskar Jihad in the political arena of Indonesia", Noorhaidi Hasan (IIAS/ISIM) offered important original information on the domestic and international background of a Muslim militia that has played a conspicuous role in the Moluccan conflict since the middle of 2000. On the basis of printed and Internet sources as well as interviews, the author discussed the social and doctrinal nature of this movement and its development in the context of recent political transformations in Indonesia and the Muslim world at large.

Inspired by his long-standing involvement with non-governmental organizations in Indonesia and with the study of social and political development, Nico Schulte Nordholt (University of Twente, the Netherlands) elaborated on the panel theme in a paper entitled "The religious dimension of Indonesian NGOs: A constraint for strengthening civil society?" In his effort to offer a balanced answer to this question, he concentrated on the importance of cross-religious reflection so that NGOs will be able to contribute to reconciliation

in conflict-ridden Indonesia.

Rémy Madinier (Université Jean Moulin-Lyon 3) discussed "The development of modernist Muslim discourse on Christians in independent Indonesia". He explained how the status of Christians in the discourse of reformist Indonesian Muslims has progressively deteriorated, from the allies of reformist Islam in the 1950s to the culprit of all New Order sins in the early 1990s, and finally to traitors to their homeland from the end of the 1990s.

Farsijana Adeney-Risakotta (Amsterdam School for Social Research), in a paper entitled "The politics of ritual and the ritual of politics in the Moluccas", proposed an original approach to the communal conflict in her region of origin. In this preliminary sketch of her future dissertation, she showed how rituals function to facilitate interaction between different groups, but have also been manipulated to establish political or economic power, from colonial times up to the present.

Three papers addressed the role of religion in present political competition in Malaysia. In spite of their differences of opinion on what the real questions in their country are, the two Malaysian participants, Patricia A. Martinez ("Untangling the new configurations of race and religion in Malaysia") and Hashim Hj Musa ("The recent Islamic reaffirmation in Malaysia: germinating Islamic integrative element in the making of a future Malaysian civilization"), both from the University of Malaya, agreed that the final stage of the Mahathir regime might well be characterized by increasing repression, including the introduction of restrictive measures in the academic world. Both questioned the conclusion of the German researcher, Claudia Derichs (Gerhard-Mercator University, Duisburg), writing on "Political Islam and Islamic politics in Malaysia: different faces and facets", that communal conflict was diminishing and becoming less violent in Malaysia – which would have been quite the opposite to what has been witnessed in its southern neighbour. <

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