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The History of Chinese Muslims' Migration into Malaysia

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the history of the Chinese Muslims who moved to Malaysia and explain the different factors that have influenced this migration at different historical stages. I separate this history mainly into two parts, namely, before the twentieth century and from the twentieth century onward. Before the twentieth century, the majority of Chinese Muslims who streamed into Malaysia were Chinese immigrants who became Chinese Muslims by converting to Islam. From the twentieth century onward, however, the majority of Chinese Muslims who came to Malaysia were Muslim Hui from China, who believed in Islam and spoke Chinese, and who constituted an ethno-religious minority group.

Key Words: Chinese Muslims; Malaysia; migration

Introduction

According to the 2016 Malaysian Census, the total population of Malaysia is 31.7 million, consisting of 16.4 million men and 15.3 million women. Malaysian citizens accounted for 89.7% of the population. Malaysia is a multiethnic society, and Malaysia's ethnic composition has a significant impact on the nation's political, economic, and social systems. Among all Malaysian citizens, the Malays and aboriginal people make up 68.6%, the Chinese make up 23.4%, the Indians make up 7.0%, and other groups make up the remaining 1.0%.¹ According to the 2010 Malaysian Census, Islam is the largest religious community in Malaysia. It is also the official religion in Malaysia, with Muslims accounting for 61.3% of the total Malaysian population.² The Malaysian Chinese religion is ambiguous and expansive, encompassing a set of symbols and practices drawn from Chinese lifestyles and traditions. These include deity-centered practices drawn from Taoism, Buddhism, nature worship, and ancestor worship. The diverse ethnic groups and religions in Malaysia reflect the diversity of Malaysian society. However, Islamic beliefs have become an important factor in deepening the ethnic boundaries and identities that constitute the Malay and the Chinese peoples (Nagata 1974).

At present, the Sino-Muslims in Malaysia include Malaysian native Chinese Muslims, who have Malaysian citizenship, and Chinese Muslims from China, who have not yet acquired it. The latter are mainly Chinese Hui migrants, who totaled about 200 families by 2016. Malaysian Chinese Muslims are Malaysian Chinese who converted into Islam due to interethnic marriage with Malays or who had learned of Islam through *Dakwah* from others, like friends, teachers, and neighbors. So far, according to my interview with the leader of the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA), KL Branch, in Kuala Lumpur, there are about 80,000 Malaysian Chinese Muslims in Malaysia. Several scholars have made great contributions to the history of Sino-Muslims in Malaysia. Rosey Wang Ma used historical documents to

highlight their presence there, their history, and their development (Ma 2003). Although she did an excellent job of covering the history of Chinese Muslims in Malaysia in different periods, including the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the British colonial era (1824–1957), and the migration of several Chinese Hui clans into Malaysia at the end of nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, she did not examine the history of Chinese Muslims who migrated into Malaysia before the Ming dynasty or provide details about the Chinese Hui migrants in Malaysia after the 1980s.

Xiao Xian (Xiao 2003) and Kong Yuanzhi (Kong 1991, 2006) conducted research on the relationship between the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia and the voyage of the Ming admiral Zheng He. Both provided detailed facts about how Zheng He spread Islam in the Malay world. Liao Dake examined the history of the Chinese Muslims, who made great contributions in spreading Islam in Southeast Asia before the fifteenth century, based on Chinese historical documents (Liao 1997). These scholars utilized an important Chinese historical document: *Ying-ya Sheng-lan* (瀛涯勝覽, The overall survey of the ocean shores), which was written in 1416 by Ma Huan (馬 歡), who accompanied Zheng He (鄭和) on several of his inspection tours and served as his chronicler and interpreter. However, this is the only significant historical document written in Chinese about the activities of Zheng He during his various voyages. Moreover, neither of these scholars provided much information about the Chinese Hui Muslims who migrated to Malaysia after the 1980s.

This paper reviews the history of the Chinese Muslims' influx into Malaysia, based on the existing literature, and identifies the factors that have impacted the flow of Chinese Muslims into Malaysia at different historical periods. In addition, this paper focuses on the history of the influx of Chinese Muslims into Malaysia since the 1980s, based on 16 months (from September 2014 to May 2016) of anthropological fieldwork, which was conducted mainly in the Malay Peninsula, and summarizes the reasons and characteristics that affected the influx of Chinese Muslims into Malaysia during this period. I

describe the history of the Chinese Muslims in Malaysia in two parts, with the first focusing on the movements of these groups prior to the twentieth century and the other focusing on the twentieth century onward.

The History of Chinese Muslims in Malaysia before the Twentieth Century

Studies have shown that the phenomenon of Chinese Muslims migrating to Malaysia has a long history. In 1972, Fu Wukang (Wolfgang Franke), a famous German Sinologist, found an ancient tomb of the Song dynasty when he visited some Chinese cultural monuments in Brunei. It included inscription saying that it was “the gravestone of an officer whose family was Pu from Quan Zhou of Song Dynasty during the period of Jin Ding, Song Dynasty (1264), [and] was erected by his two sons, Ying and Jia.” According to Cai Yongjian’s work, *Xi Shan Za Zhi* (西山杂志), in the Qing dynasty record, “during the period of 1228 to 1234 in [the] Song Dynasty, a man named Pu Zongmin succeeded in the imperial competitive examination, and then he was appointed as a high-ranking minister. Later, he was sent to Brunei by the dynasty and died there.” Pu was considered to be a descendant of Arab Muslims in Quan Zhou (Fu and Chen 1993). However, a large-scale migration of Chinese Muslims began to take place in the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties. The original factors were, first, the frequent wars at the end of the Yuan dynasty, which caused people in the coastal areas to flee to the sea for safety; and second, the restrictions and the discrimination against further Muslim migration found in the early Ming dynasty policies. The Ming emperor Taizu (太祖) issued the following commands in 1372: “All the Mongolians and Muslims must have an inter-ethnic marriage with the Chinese, and endogamy is forbidden strictly. Those who break the rules will be caned 80 [times] and recruited into the imperial palace as servants” (*Min Hui Dian*, Vol. 141).

There is also a statement that in 1385, the dynasty ordered that the Muslims in Guangdong be driven out, which forced many of them, including Chinese

Muslims, into exile. They migrated to other places, mostly in Southeast Asia (Broomhall 1910: 34–35). For instance, in Palembang, Sumatra, there was a man named Liang Daoming, who had left his home in China and settled there. Among thousands of Cantonese and Fujianese merchants, Liang was elected as chieftain and a man named Shi Junqin was elected as his assistant. Shi was a Muslim, and was appointed commander of Palembang (*Ming Chengzu Shi Lu*, Vol. 52).

In the fourth year (1406) of the Yongle emperor, Liang sent a delegation of two men, named Hui Hui Hajji and Mahmud, to the Ming dynasty. In the first year (1425) of the Hongxi emperor, the head of Palembang, a man named Ali, and Zhang Fo Na Ma, both of whom were Chinese Muslims, paid tribute to the emperor (*Ming Chengzu Shi Lu*, Vol. 52; *Ming Xuanzong Shi Lu*, Vol. 5). Ma Huan, the interpreter of Zheng He, wrote in his book about the scene he encountered in Java, wherein the affluent Chinese were all Cantonese and Fujianese who had fled from China. He said they ate only good and pure halal food, and most of them followed the doctrine of Islam in fasting. Thus, it seems probable that at that time, among the Chinese of Sumatra and Java, Muslims accounted for a considerable number (Liao 1997, 2007).

In the Ming dynasty, there was another new development pertaining to Islam in China, that is, the formation of a new ethnic community, the Hui. As the Chinese Muslims had had continuous interaction with overseas countries and maritime networks, they were well acquainted with situations abroad and were therefore able to settle elsewhere. Throughout the centuries, a large number of Chinese Muslims migrated to Southeast Asia, forming a big, scattered, less concentrated residential pattern. As a result, there were Chinese Muslim communities in Palembang, Meleka, and elsewhere (Lombard and Salmon 2001).

The most famous event in Chinese Muslim migration to the Malay world involved Zheng He's several voyages. Zheng He, a Yunnanese, was born to a Hui Muslim family whose surname was initially "MA." He was castrated and

sent to work at the imperial palace as a eunuch after a war between Yunnan and the central dynasty, which resulted in his father's death and the capture of his family when he was about 10 years old. He then earned the appreciation of Ming Chengzu (成祖) Zhu Li (朱棣) and was granted the surname "ZHENG" by the emperor after he helped him with many conquests against his opponents, which helped Zhu Li finally ascend the throne.

From 1405 to 1434, Zheng He launched seven voyages to Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and East Africa. Among the fleets, there were Muslim retinues. According to Parlindungan Mangaradja Onggang, Zheng He popularized Islam in Southeast Asia mainly through two kinds of activities. One was by way of praying in local mosques with his Muslim retinues and building mosques in Java, and the other was via establishing Chinese Muslim communities in Southeast Asia. The first Chinese Muslim community in Indonesia was formed in Palembang in 1407, and later other Chinese Muslim communities emerged in the Malay Peninsula, Java, and the Philippines, from 1411 to 1416 (Parlindungan 1964: 652–653). Zheng He's arrival drove the spread of Islam in the Malay world and also aided the growth of the Chinese Muslim population, who were already involved in commerce. Thus, Islam and the economy in the Malay world were developed rapidly as a result of the activities of Zheng He and the Chinese Muslims in Southeast Asia.

During the British colonial period in the Malay Peninsula (1824–1957), in order to address the large labor shortages facing the tin-mining and plantation industries, the British East India Company imported a large number of laborers from neighboring countries around Malaysia, especially China and South Asia. Some scholars have shown that during this period, there were Hui people from Tianjin, China, who were transported to Sabah by the British East India Company. A study by Rosey Wang Ma on these Tianjin Hui showed that among the 108 Chinese who were transported from China to Sabah, there were four families, with the surnames Wang, Li, Hong, and Guo, from the Hui ethnic group in Tianjin (Ma 2003).

By the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, there were a number of Hui people who had willingly migrated from China to Malaysia in successive waves. For example, the Guo family from Fujian province came to Singapore and Penang at the end of the nineteenth century, and the Ding family came from Melaka and Ipoh. Tan Chee-Beng conducted a study in 1987 on a group of Hui people who moved to Terengganu, Malaysia, from Guangzhou, Guangdong, China. They claimed to be “Yunnan natives” and maintained their ethnic identity while being accepted by the local Malays and Chinese (Tan 1991).

The History of Chinese Muslims in Malaysia in the Mid-Twentieth Century

During the period of the Republic of China (1910–1949), the Hui Ahong (imam) Ma Tianying (馬天英) and his family relocated to Malaysia and thereafter exercised an important influence on Malaysian society. Ma Tianying, a native of Shandong, arrived in Malaysia as part of a visiting delegation from 1938 to 1940, and introduced Islam and Chinese Muslims to the local Chinese



Photo of the Overseas Chinese Muslim Association Malaysia’s donation ceremony on January 17, 2015, to provide aid to the state government of Terengganu, which was struck by heavy flooding.

populace. Then, in 1948, he moved his family to Malaysia in 1948. After that, Ma Tianying made many contributions in Malaysia, facilitating cultural exchanges and dialogue between the Chinese and the Malays and becoming a well-known figure in Malaysian society.

One thing that Ma Tianying has done that had far-reaching benefits for Malaysia is that in 1960, with the support of Malaysia's first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman (1957–1970), the government established a Malaysia Islamic Welfare Organization (Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia, or PERKIM). Ma Tianying was appointed as the first chairman of this organization. Headquartered in Kuala Lumpur, PERKIM has chapters in all the states of the country. The group aims to help and guide Malaysian Muslims to better understand their faith, carrying out religious classes, publishing Islamic-oriented books for different ethnic groups, identifying newly converted Muslims, and contributing to communal social welfare. Since its establishment more than 50 years ago, thanks to the efforts of the organization, many new Muslims from Malaysia and abroad have converted to Islam (Mi 1993; Wan 2015).

The largest migration of Chinese Hui into Malaysia in modern times occurred after the 1980s. This group migrated to Malaysia mainly for the purposes of studying abroad, investing in business, searching for work opportunities, or simply out of a desire to live there. In the following section, I will explore the reasons, time, channels, and modes for these kinds of migrations.

The History of Chinese Muslims Who Migrated into Malaysia after the 1980s

- ***Studying Abroad and Migration***

Before the middle of the twentieth century, overseas Chinese migrated largely in order to escape from China's famines, domestic upheavals, and wars, as well as to make a living. Starting in the 1980s, however, overseas Chinese immigrant groups mostly migrated to pursue a better quality of life.

They studied and settled abroad, mostly in Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and other developed countries. Many of these sojourners came from economically developed areas such as eastern China and the coastal areas. However, for the vast majority of the Hui people living in inland China, their own economic constraints, poor education, and religious identity—a very important feature—meant that they often opted to choose, for their study destinations, Arabic-speaking or simply Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, as well as Malaysia, which was emerging as a popular destination for Hui migrants after the 1980s.

China's reform and opening-up (post-1979) marked a major turning point in its modern history, and since that nation has sought to restore contact with the outside world, which includes renewing those dormant links between its Chinese Muslim communities and the Muslim world. In the initial stages of reform and opening-up, Arab countries in the Middle East and international Islamic societies and organizations visiting China helped create the conditions for Chinese Muslims to study abroad.

It is noteworthy that Chinese Hui students were able to study in Malaysia and were enabled in doing so by the help and assistance they received from various multinational Muslim nongovernmental organizations. For example, the first- and second-generation Chinese Hui students coming to Malaysia obtained scholarships for school tuitions in Malaysia, along with living subsidies, admission notices, visas, and other forms of support and help from the Regional Islamic Da'wah Council for Southeast Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP).

RISEAP aims to connect Muslim minorities in different countries in the Asia Pacific region together and to help introduce Islam to non-Muslim groups. Its headquarters is located in Kuala Lumpur, with branch offices in many places throughout the Asia Pacific region, including Hong Kong and China. The abovementioned prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, served as the first president of this organization. In 1982, at the invitation of the Chinese Islamic Association, a delegation from Tunku Abdul Rahman, led by the Asia



Photo of the Overseas Chinese Muslim Association Malaysia's visit and donation ceremony to a Rohingya refugees primary school in Malaysia on May 1, 2015.

Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, visited China for the first time (RISEAP 1982). From July 1988 to October 1995, APEC dispatched two more delegations to China to talk with the China Islamic Association about the enrollment of more Chinese Muslim students in higher education institutions in Malaysia (RISEAP 1988, 1995).

The earliest group of Chinese Hui students to study in Malaysia came in 1989–1998. The basis of this division is as follows: the first generation of Chinese Muslims to study in Malaysia attended the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and the Sultan Royal Islamic Institute in Terengganu Zainal Abidin Islamic College (KUSZA). As a result of the Asian financial crisis, the IIUM stopped admitting international students in 1998 and 1999, but it returned to recruit international students in 2000. Terengganu State Islamic College, from 1994 to 1998, had enrolled with the Asia-Pacific Syria and Malaysia Islamic Development Authority to sponsor the only group of Chinese Hui students to go to the school for a four-year religious-training program. Since then, the program has been shelved. However, after this period, the study destination for Chinese Hui students was not limited to

these two schools. Therefore, we can refer to the first-generation and second-generation Chinese students who came to IIUM before 1998. In addition, the Chinese Hui students who went to study in Malaysia during this period received assistance and support from international Muslim organizations in applying for schools and receiving grants, but afterward, Chinese Hui students did not enjoy these benefits.

These students constituted the first group of Chinese Hui people who came to Malaysia after the implementation of China's reform and opening-up. With the support of international Muslim organizations, they attended such institutions as IIUM and KUSZA. It is worth noting that at that time, although they were Muslims who originated from Northwest China (Gansu, Qinghai, and Ningxia), and had a strong sense of their identity as Muslims and a desire to study in Muslim countries, few of them actually studied religious courses in Malaysia. On the contrary, most, in fact, selected majors from the humanities and social sciences, such as history, economics, management, and political science.

According to a number of interviews I conducted in my fieldwork, up until 1995–1998, China and Malaysia had not yet engaged in extensive cooperation in the field of education. Therefore, the first batch of Chinese students who studied in Malaysia at that time was limited to Muslim Chinese Hui students, and they had very few Han Chinese counterparts attending Malaysian educational institutions. These Chinese Hui were therefore a pioneering group, and later students from the Hui community turned to them for help and support as part of a transnational network.

Between 1994 and 1998, RISEAP and the department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, or JAKIM) conducted a four-year religious-training program at KUSZA, which sought to recruit a group of Chinese Hui Muslim students in order to receive religious training in Terengganu. The students were to be awarded a diploma in religion following the completion of the course. Participating in this program were a total of 36 Chinese Muslim students, who came from various locations across

China, including the Northwest, Northeast, Inner Mongolia, Henan, Sichuan, and Fujian.

By 1998, the vast majority of the first-generation of Chinese Hui students who had come to Malaysia had graduated and chosen to return to China, where they found employment in the fields of business and religious education. The few who opted to remain in Malaysia started various businesses, and an even smaller handful found work as university lecturers, doctors, and religious professionals.

Through the assistance of local and international Muslim organizations, Chinese Hui students got the opportunity to study in Malaysia and promote, through their presence, not only Sino-Malaysian relations, but also cultural exchanges between China and the Muslim world. Additionally, their study abroad in Malaysia also had a positive and far-reaching influence on Chinese Muslim communities in China. In particular, from May 27 to May 31, 2004, the prime minister of Malaysia (2003–2009), Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, paid a visit to China and concluded several agreements aimed at enhancing strategic cooperation between the two countries, as expressed in a joint communiqué. These included one pertaining to the field of education—the “Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Education in the Context of Diplomacy and International Relations.”

Since then, the number of Chinese Hui students attending Malaysian institutions has been increasing year by year. In 2004, the Kolej Universiti Insaniah, located in Jeddah Malaysia, started to enroll Muslim students from China. It has, since then, changed into a university and presently has a School of Management, a Faculty of Islamic Studies, a School of Economics, an Institute of Qur’anic Research, a School of Engineering and Technology, and an Institute of Arabic Literature, among others. The first batch of Chinese Muslims consisted of four Hui students from a famous Arabic college in Henan. Following that, the university has annually received large influxes of Chinese Muslim students from Arabic schools throughout China. At its

peak, the university boasted more than 300 Chinese Muslim students at one time. In addition to this institution, nearly 20 other public universities host Chinese Muslim students, including the Malaysia University of Science and Technology and National University.

Private universities have also attracted many Chinese Muslim students. According to the statistics of the second All-China Muslim Students Communication Conference 2012, there were more than 2,000 Muslim students from China in the country, with their numbers expected to reach 2,500 by 2015. Among these, 90% were identified as Hui.³ Based on this statistic, among these Chinese Muslim students, the number of Chinese Hui students would be expected to be roughly 2,250. According to the available statistics, more than half of these Chinese Muslim students attended private universities. Compared with the first generation of Chinese Muslim students in Malaysia, the characteristics of the later generation of students could be described as follows: First, in terms of the degree of education, the majority of the students had already received a standard education from China's national education system before heading abroad. Second, in terms of their geographical origins, the Chinese Muslim students in this period were not limited to those coming from the Northwest, but also included many other provinces. Third, these Chinese Muslim students were basically self-funded and did not receive financial support from international Muslim organizations as their predecessors did. Only a very small number of them actually obtained university scholarships. Fourth, this group enjoyed a far greater number of educational choices, both public and private, than their predecessors did.

In terms of academic and professional choices, the earlier generation of Chinese Muslim students in Malaysia sought a religious education and often became religious professionals in China following their graduation, although a few did settle in Malaysia and do business there. After the post-2010 generation, Chinese Muslim students showed greater interest in the social and hard sciences. After graduation, relatively few chose to stay in Malaysia,

and instead they opted to return their homeland in search of lucrative job opportunities. The few who did settle in Malaysia did not go into business, but rather assumed various professional jobs, such as doctor, academic, or chartered financial analyst.

- ***Exploring Business and Migration***

The emergence of Hui businesses in Malaysia was closely connected to the arrival of many Chinese Muslims to study. Arguably, education and business were an intertwined feature of Chinese Muslim life in Malaysia. Business was not only a motivation for their migration, but also a means for the adaptation of these new immigrants into Malaysian culture.

Many of the first generation of Chinese Hui students were involved in business, particularly in the Muslim apparel and textile industries. The three Hui businessmen Ke Qin, Ma Hongji, and Cui Wen, who were the pioneers in this industry in Malaysia, and who had accumulated extensive experience



Photo of porcelains printed with Arabic letters in one Chinese Hui migrant's textile shop.

and international connections well before their arrival to the country, are good examples. Both Ke Qin and Ma Hongji were from Xinjiang. In the 1980s, they studied Arabic in various institutions across Northwest China and Beijing. After completing their college education in Beijing, they contacted multiple foreign Islamic universities, and eventually were admitted to the IIU, which is located in Pakistan, around 1990. In an interview,⁴ Ma Hongji said, “In the 1980s, there was a ‘going abroad’ fever throughout China and in our Hui community, as well. For our Hui people, learning Arabic was a popular thing at that time. As long as someone learned Arabic, he could get good opportunities to study or work in Arab countries. Therefore, we had studied Arabic for several years in Northwest China and Beijing.”

Ke Qin and Ma Hongji started their business in Pakistan during their study abroad and took advantage of the holidays to import Chinese silk, Muslim clothing, bedding, and other textile products for sale. They reproduced this model in Saudi Arabia, where their Arabic skills were utilized to good effect, before moving to Malaysia. It should be noted that after the reform and opening-up, the Arabic language became a link between the Chinese Muslims and the Muslim world, and Chinese Hui sought to position themselves, given their linguistic skills, as middlemen in these different international relationships.

Many Hui merchants who entered into the Malaysian business arena did so in a part-time fashion while also studying at various universities. The pursuit of religious knowledge, which was prioritized by this early generation, was accompanied by a process of learning about different trades and business skills as well as economic conditions on the ground. The part-time nature of their work in business partially arose from the fact that many owned very little capital and therefore had to start from scratch.

In succeeding decades, however, and with the increasing number of Hui people migrating to Malaysia, a social capital effect has emerged among the transnational Hui communities that links Malaysia and China. Regardless of the authenticity of the information about Malaysia obtained from the pioneers, the

size of its Muslim population, its appealing religious and social environments, and its momentum of commercial growth all succeeded in attracting many Hui people living in China. At the same time, with the development of modern transportation networks and the improvements in social status and economic conditions for the Hui people, travel abroad is no longer a luxury. “Regardless of whether [there is] success or not, at least, we should go out and take a look” has become the attitude of many Hui people. This underlies the continuous influx of Hui businessmen and capital into Malaysia.

Modern information technologies also play an increasingly important role in the transnational migration of ethnic groups. When religious groups make use of these technologies to form a transnational network, the outflow and influx of transnational migration are closely linked and help cultivate an “exotic” imagination among the group’s members. As Appadurai (2012: 8–9) put it: “those who are eager to move, those who have migrated, those who want to come back, and those who choose to stay behind are more or less influenced by radio, television, tapes, videos, newspapers and telephones. Both the political issues involved in adapting to the new environment and the factors driving them to move or return home are deeply influenced by the imagination of the mass media and often transcend the national realm.” These technologies, especially the Internet, and the associated rise of social media outlets like WeChat, Facebook, and so on, play an important role in the cross-border migration of the Hui in China today.

Unlike the earlier generation of Chinese Hui merchants who immigrated to Malaysia (1989–2009), the Hui merchants in this period (2010–) already had some commercial experience in the country and had also accumulated some capital. Moreover, they had access to transnational contacts from among the Chinese Hui diaspora in Malaysia, and accordingly gained valuable information and assistance with respect to developing their businesses in the country. They have also benefited from the Malaysian government’s relaxation of visa and settlement policies for foreigners over the past two decades.

The Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) program originated in 1996 as part of a long-term targeting of retired foreigners, namely, the Silver Hair Project, aimed at encouraging retired people with pensions to travel to Malaysia and reside there for extended periods of time. Due to the project's success, the government decided in 2002 to officially rename the Silver Hair Project as Malaysia's Second Home Project. The target audiences of the project were no longer confined to retirees but now were aimed at all foreigners aged 21 and above.

Once it was implemented, the MM2H was met with considerable enthusiasm. In 2003 alone, the number of applications totaled the sum of all cumulative applications in 1996–2002. As of the end of 2009, the Malaysian government had approved 32,063 eligible foreign individuals or families to settle in Malaysia. Chinese applicants have been ranked first in the MM2H program in terms of their numbers, with some 4,111 applying, followed by people from Bangladesh, Britain, Japan, Singapore, and elsewhere. In 2009, the Malaysian government modified the MM2H project, with the timeframe for visas increased from 5 years to 10 years and the possibility of lifelong conditional renewal. In 2010, under the program, the application procedures for foreign spouses of Malaysian nationals were relaxed. Participants in the MM2H can also enjoy the benefits of purchasing property and cars in Malaysia and make use of medical services and educational services there.

Since 2010, there have been growing numbers of Chinese Hui participants in MM2H. According to the author's interview with Zhou Jun, a leader of the Malaysian Chinese Hui Chamber of Commerce, as of 2015, the total number of Hui family applicants approved by the Malaysian Ministry of Tourism to China approached nearly 200. It should be noted that not all Hui migrants who possessed a home in Malaysia planned to live there throughout the year. Rather, most of them purchased a house in Malaysia while maintaining constant transnational movement—like migratory birds—to oversee their businesses between the two countries. In addition, some of the Hui family's

children stay in Malaysia for secondary and higher education. In order to take care of their children and supervise them, the parents apply for Student Dependent Visas. It is not uncommon for parents to be involved in business while caring for their children.

In short, the Chinese Hui businessmen who migrated to Malaysia after the reform and opening-up were partially driven by Malaysia's image as a Muslim country with a favorable social environment. Additionally, policies of the Malaysian government that were designed to encourage the inflow of foreign capital and the development of foreign businesses have also been a factor in these migrations.

- ***Job Search and Migration***

In addition to students and businessmen, there are also some professionals who migrated to Malaysia in the 1980s in search of work. Two examples follow:

Ma Zhongben spent his early years in Libya studying Arabic, and graduated in 1992. Thanks to the recommendation of his friend Ma Zhiliang, a classmate who attended the same graduate program in China, Ma Zhongben became a lecturer at the Royal Islamic College in Terengganu. He is responsible for teaching Arabic to students, making *Dakwah* to non-Muslim Chinese in Malaysia, and recruiting Muslim students for the university. With respect to Muslim students, he successfully recruited a group from China in 1993–1994. In succeeding years, he earned his MS and PhD degrees from the University of Malaya. His academic research focuses largely on popularizing Islam among the non-Muslim Chinese in Malaysia, and he has published several monographs.

From Ma Zhongben's case, we can see that due to long-standing cultural barriers between the Malays and the Chinese in Malaysia, their understanding of each other's culture and religion was not deep or comprehensive enough. Therefore, compared with the Malays, who were quite knowledgeable about

Islam, or the native Muslim Chinese, who knew little about it, those Chinese Muslims from China were the most suitable in approaching the Chinese and doing *Dakwah* toward the local Chinese community. As Ma Zhongben is ethnically Chinese, with considerable familiarity in Chinese culture, this helped facilitate his exchange and communication with Malaysian Chinese groups. He is also a Muslim born into a traditional religious family and has studied in Arab countries, and thus possesses a degree of Islamic expertise. This dual identity makes him an extremely suitable cultural middleman in Malaysian society.

Another interesting case is that of Yu Xinglong, a native of Pingliang, Gansu. He studied at the Islamic Seminary in Lanzhou, Gansu, from 1996 to 2001. After working for a local magazine called *Muslim Communication* (穆斯林通訊) for three years, he later worked at a school for students who had dropped out in Lanzhou. In 2005 he moved to Guangzhou and became involved in the foreign import-export business.

During his study in Lanzhou, Yu Xinglong met a university lecturer named Ma Qing. In 2009, when Ma Qing visited a university in Malaysia as a visiting scholar, he learned that the Chinese Muslim Association in Sarawak needed a Chinese Muslim imam who could teach Arabic and Islam to native Malaysian Chinese Muslims. Under the recommendation of Ma Qing, Yu Xinglong went to Sarawak in 2009 and successfully applied for the job. Throughout his tenure at the Chinese Muslim Society in Sarawak, Yu Xinglong was put in charge of a Chinese Muslim mosque, where he gave a *khutba*, or sermon, in Chinese every Friday. He also held many activities for Chinese Hui migrants and Malaysian Chinese Muslims, thus bringing these two communities together. In my interview with Yu,⁵ he said:

I think we have advantages in Malaysia. We Muslims in China are deeply influenced by Islamic civilization and Chinese civilization. We have two cultures, and we can become a bridge between the Malays and the Chinese here. Malaysian Chinese Muslims is quite a small group

here and the non-Muslim Chinese always maintain a wrong perception on them. It is not true when they call Islam the “Malays’ Religion.” Islam is a worldwide religion, not a religion of one ethnic group. Only by bringing Chinese Muslims in China into Malaysia and introducing the history and culture of Chinese Muslims to Malays and the Chinese, will they be able to understand and respect each other better.

Currently, Yu Xinglong has been transferred to the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association branch in Sembilan to become an imam, where he is engaging with Malay, Chinese, and Chinese Muslims and serving as a bridge between the Islamic and Chinese civilizations.

From the case of Ma Zhongben and Yu Xinglong, we can see that the Hui people, who are immersed in both their Muslim and Chinese identities, enjoy certain advantages in Malaysia.

The General Situation of Chinese Muslims in Malaysia

The population of the native Malaysian Chinese Muslims in Malaysia is estimated to be around 80,000. Among them, only a small number are the actual descendants of Chinese Muslims from the mainland, and most are converts to Islam due to interethnic marriage with Malays or simply from their cultural and social assimilation via the study of Islam or the encouragement of their Muslim social circles. The general dilemma faced by this group is that following their conversion, they have to give up their Chinese names and change to Muslim names such as “Muhammad” and “Amina.” Their non-Muslim family members and the whole non-Muslim Chinese community will often describe them as having “betrayed [the] ancestors.” Thus, their family members, and even the entire Chinese society, will draw a line, making them feel ostracized by Malaysian Chinese society.

On the other hand, however, the Chinese Muslims are not enthusiastically accepted by the Malays. Instead, they are subject to some degree of suspicion and mistrust. There are often questions about their motivations for converting



Photo of a famous Lamian brand of Chinese Hui food with many branches throughout Malaysia.

to Islam, and they are accused of actually wanting access to the privileges granted by the government to the Malays. The hardships suffered by native Malaysian Chinese Muslims are not limited to their lifetimes, but also continue on in death. For example, there are cases of Chinese secretly converting to Islam and not informing their families, a situation which often results in “corpse-grabbing” incidents between their relatives and Islamic organizations with respect to proper burial. The array of ethnic, religious, political, and economic divisions in Malaysia is at the heart of the predicament for native Malaysian Chinese Muslims, who neither “belong to the Chinese or the Malay communities” (Ma 2012).

According to my fieldwork, at present there are about 200 families of Hui migrants from China who have been settled in Malaysia for an extended period of time (1–30 years). Most of them, with the exception of a few individuals who have obtained permanent resident rights in Malaysia, still hold Chinese nationality and live in Malaysia as overseas Chinese under different kinds of visas. They still cherish strong memories regarding China and their hometowns, and they maintain close cross-border ties with their families and social networks from those locales. The relatively stable and long-term

residents from among the Hui migrants to Malaysia are currently the students attending various public and private universities and colleges, whose numbers are roughly 2,250. The number of Chinese Hui migrants who frequently travel between China and Malaysia for family visits, trips, and business is about 50,000 each year.⁶

The Hui migrants are mainly located in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Roughly 60% of them gather in the Gombak district of Selangor. This district is closely related to the concentration of early Hui students. As increasing numbers of Hui migrants have come to settle in Gombak, it is gradually transforming into the largest community for Hui migrants in all of Malaysia. As already noted, most of the Chinese Hui migrants engage in various types of business, such as the provision of halal food and beverages, the textile industry (mainly Muslim clothing and various types of textiles), tourism, education, and even in real estate. Not surprisingly, Gombak has become an important business center for these migrants, and with the exception of halal restaurants and textile companies, many of these enterprises and shops there are run by Chinese Hui migrants.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed the history of Chinese Muslims who migrated to Malaysia and sought to identify the factors that influenced these influxes at different historical periods. It mainly focused on the migrations that took place after the 1980s and analyzed the reasons and characteristics of the Chinese Hui migrations at that time.

There has been evidence of Chinese Muslim settlement in Malaysia dating back to the Song dynasty. Before the 1940s, Chinese Muslims were mostly forced by circumstances—including war, famine and labor trafficking—to move to Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries. They contributed to the spread of Islam in the region and brought some degree of economic development. Following the mid-twentieth century, the Hui people in China

started moving into Malaysia in larger waves, and played an important role in *Dakwah* work among non-Muslim Malaysian Chinese communities. After the 1980s, an even larger wave—in search of education, business, and work—arrived in Malaysia.

Turning to the reasons and factors that encouraged Chinese Muslim migration into Malaysia since 1980s, I argue that the religious and ethnic environment in Malaysia was important in attracting this community to the country. In addition, transnational networks based on religion and ethnicity, as well as the reduction in the costs of movement and travel and access to new streams of information, facilitated these migrations into Malaysia.

First, Muslims are the majority of the Malaysian population and Islam is positioned as an official religion and protected by the government, factors that, along with the sizable population of Muslims in Malaysia, have become important in attracting the migration of Hui, who are a minority in their largely non-Muslim home country. The religious atmosphere in Malaysia is another important attraction for Chinese Hui students and businessmen.

Second, the multiethnic culture in Malaysia is appealing to many Chinese Hui, as the fluidity in language and culture is convenient for those seeking to adapt and interact with Malaysian society. Malaysia still retains a strong British influence as a former colony, and its mix of various cultures has created an environment that can potentially meet the needs of people coming from many different cultural backgrounds.

Third, the improvements in economic conditions, the low migration costs, and the conveniences offered by modern transportation and information technologies have all facilitated the transnational migration of Chinese Hui people abroad. Compared with the Western and Arab countries, Malaysia is geographically closer to China, and its tuition fees and living costs are relatively low. Access has been facilitated furthermore by the opening of several AirAsia international flight routes between Malaysia and several cities in China, making it easy for Chinese Hui people to travel there.

Finally, a transnational network based on shared religion and ethnicity, has provided Chinese Hui migrants with important social support networks. The constant movement of these migrants has also become a type of social capital in its own right.

End Notes

- (1) Malaysia Official Portal, Department of Statistics, “Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2014–2016,” <https://www.dosm.gov.my/>.
- (2) Malaysia Official Portal, Department of Statistics, “Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristic Report 2010 (Updated: 05/08/2011),” <https://www.dosm.gov.my/>.
- (3) This information was supplied by one of the heads of the Chinese Muslim International Students Association who has been studying in Malaysia for many years and who organized the Second China Muslim Exchange Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 2016.
- (4) I conducted this interview with Ma Hongji in the evening at his home in Gombak on May 28, 2016.
- (5) I conducted this interview with Yu Xinglong and his family members in the afternoon at his home in Seremban on May 3, 2016.
- (6) The figure is based on my interviews with several Chinese Hui businessmen who run travel agencies in Malaysia.

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