

Islam and the Chinese in Southeast Asia: A Historical Overview

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This paper examines the interlocking histories of the Islamic and Chinese regional spheres in South-east Asia between the thirteenth century and the present. While Asian historiography has often focused on one or the other, or their perceptions of each other, they have seldom dealt with their interactions and intersections from a long-term perspective. Given Southeast Asia's importance in maritime Asian trade networks, the region is an ideal analytical frame for the study of these interactions, and their impact on economy, society, culture and politics within the region. This paper broaches several questions, how have the patterns and dynamics of the Islamic and Chinese cultural spheres in Southeast Asia as well as their interactions with local societies and each other changed over time? How have colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the nation-building projects after 1945, as well as new global environments such as the Cold War, the *dakwah* movements, the rise of the Asia-Pacific economies, and the recent "war on terror" changed these dynamics? How have the relations between the Islamic and Chinese spheres shaped the identity politics of the different nation-states in the region, and vice versa? How do different localities and sub-regions in Southeast Asia diverge in these patterns of intersection between Islam and the Chinese? Is the relationship between Islam and the Chinese inherently antithetical? What were the positions and roles of Chinese Muslims or Muslim women who married into Chinese *peranakan* families in these communities? This paper adopts a long-term approach to the study of Islam and the Chinese in Southeast Asia, as a way of understanding their influence and intersections in present-day Southeast Asia.



Figure Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Dawoodi Bohra Mosque, Hill Street, Singapore

The importance of Southeast Asia both as a maritime crossroads straddling the Indian Ocean and East Asian seas and as a source of commodities in global trade also made it an important region of cross-cultural contact. The first millennium of the Christian era saw the influence of Indian religions in the religious, political, and material life in Southeast Asia in much of island and mainland Southeast Asia, with Chinese influences in what is today northern Vietnam. The influence of Islam in the region can be seen as a continuation of these earlier Indian Ocean connections. Although the presence of Islamic communities in Southeast Asia and China dated to the first centuries of Islamic expansion in western Asia, it was only in the thirteenth century that it made a political impact on the region. The further spread of Islam in the region coincided with important shifts in China-Southeast Asia interactions, with growing Chinese mercantile migration to the region during the late Sung. The early nexus of these two spheres in Southeast Asia was exemplified in the Zheng He voyages and the rise of Melaka during the early Ming dynasty, as well as the tributary missions from Southeast Asian polities to China. It also coincided with the spread of the Viet state southwards towards what is today central Vietnam.

The dynamics underlying the expansion of these respective spheres were rather different. They were not just political and commercial, but also social and religious. The growing importance of Muslim traders in the trans-Asian maritime trade and the conversion of the rulers of key port-polities in island Southeast Asia to Islam,

coincided with bans on overseas trade by the Ming Chinese government. Early Chinese migration to the region was, in the opinion of scholars like Anthony Reid, assimilated into the new Islamic port-polity cultures, playing important roles in the development of the shipbuilding industry and maritime cultures in the region. Some histories of Java also have the Chinese playing important roles in the early spread of Islam on the island. Chinese merchants also played important roles in the rise of new Siamese centers like Ayutthaya, alongside Persian merchants and shippers. Portuguese commercial expansion in the region seemed to have intensified the spread of Islam in the archipelago. By the time the Dutch East India Company entered the fray in the early 17th century, the key Chinese merchants in ports like Banten were Muslim Chinese, whom the first Governor-General who established Batavia saw as crucial to the survival and early development of the port. Ethnic Chinese, both Muslim and otherwise, were to play important roles in both European and local port-towns and polities.

The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were to see important shifts in the Islamic and Chinese spheres in Southeast Asia, resulting from new patterns of migration from both the Indian Ocean and the East Asian littorals. The growing prominence of Hadrami or migrant Arab Sayids in the port-polities of archipelagic Southeast Asia and new movements of Islamic reform in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries paralleled the growing migration of Chinese labor communities in new mining and agricultural economies in archipelagic and mainland Southeast Asia. In archipelagic Southeast Asia, Chinese mercantile and laboring communities formed key alliances with rulers in the region (alongside their respective European mercantile allies) to develop the abovementioned economies. The southward expansion of the Viet state also brought Sinic cultural influences further south to what is today central and southern Vietnam. These trends were to continue into the nineteenth century, with the expansion of European colonial states in the region.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were to see further transformation of these relations, with the continued growth of Chinese communities in the new regional economies of production and trade, and the gradual marginalization of local political elites within the new European colonial regimes. Chinese *peranakan* (local-born, creole) communities began to associate more with the new Chinese migrant communities and with European administrative elites than with the traditional political elites. The creation of new plural societies involved the replacement of multiethnic coalitions that were typical of early nineteenth century politics in the Malay world region by new colonial hierarchies in which the European colonial state mediated between segregated ethnic populations. The roles of local elites were increasingly restricted to religion and culture, and the relations between the different communities regulated by cultural and ethnic difference. Islam was to play an important role both within the colonial state and in the Malay nationalist circles in the formation of new identities and communities. In this context, the category of “indigenous” and its associated ethnicities in archipelagic Southeast Asia became increasingly associated with Islam, rather than place. As the case of early Indonesian nationalist organizations has shown, the religious and cultural differences between Chinese communities and local communities identifying with Islam were intertwined with economic competition in key commercial sectors.

The creation of plural societies, the advent of new nationalist movements, and the ethnic policies of the colonial regimes (including the Japanese military administrations) all contributed to the shape of new national politics in the post-1945 era, and defined the relationship between Islam and the Chinese in different parts of Southeast Asia. The targeting of ethnic Chinese and Eurasian minorities in Java during the Indonesian revolution, the racialization of the communist emergency, the race riots in Singapore and Malaysia in the 1950s and 1960s, and the simmering tensions between Muslim majorities and ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia highlight the overriding trend in the national politics in different parts of Southeast Asia with Muslim Malay majorities or

ethnic Chinese majorities. These tensions coincided with new programs of national economic development and issues of wealth distribution and economic power in these nation-states. These developments have also been influenced by the new Islamic reform movements in the region since the 1970s as well as growing conversion among the Chinese to Christianity, the advent of reformist Buddhist movements, and the rise of new Chinese religious movements based on the syncretism of Chinese history, traditional religions, and the major world religions (including Islam).

Rather than reducing the relations between Islam and the Chinese in Southeast Asia to essentialized cultural-religious differences, they have to be seen and understood in the broader political, cultural and socio-economic contexts of their interactions, as well as from a long-term historical perspective. Global developments such as West Asian/Middle Eastern politics, the rise of China, and the “war of terror” are important contemporary variables. This paper shall attempt to place these dynamics in their respective contexts, and provide a chronological outline of major shifts in the relationship between Islam and the Chinese in the *longue durée* history of Southeast Asia.

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