

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Hui Migrants Pose a Cultural Challenge to Malaysia**

By Hew Wai Weng\*

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- China's Hui ethnic group have been part of the long-term migratory movement from mainland China to Southeast Asia. Since the late 1980s their visibility as a group in Malaysia has increased.
- The Hui are often in Malaysia to further their studies. For many of them, migration involves business endeavours, and these often intersect with their religious commitments.
- China's 'One Belt, One Road' strategy will likely intensify Beijing's ties with Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. The Hui Muslims may play an important role in such interactions.
- The more pronounced presence of Hui migrants in Malaysia challenges a widely held perception among both the Chinese and Muslim communities there that "Chinese-ness" and Islam are incompatible. This development has also given many local Chinese Muslims more confidence in publicizing their heretofore uncommon identity.
- In the Hui's frequent interactions with local Muslims, in business or otherwise, religion plays a significant role. Their language affinities with Chinese Malaysians also facilitates interactions with this group through trading and social activities. The Hui also continue to maintain various connections with mainland China, be these familial, religious, or business-related.
- The contemporary mobility and business networks of the Hui can therefore be studied both as Chinese and Muslim, and perhaps more cogently as a synthesis of both.

\* *Hew Wai Weng is Visiting Fellow at both the Malaysia and the Indonesia Studies Programme at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. Email: [wai\\_weng@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:wai_weng@iseas.edu.sg)*

## INTRODUCTION

There has been a noticeable rise recently in the number of Hui restaurants in Southeast Asian cities, serving renowned Hui dishes, including the renowned Lanzhou hand-pulled noodle. These include: ‘Sulaiman Muslim Restaurant’ in Jakarta; ‘CMR Cina Muslim Restaurant’ in Penang; as well as ‘Authentic Heritage Pulled Noodle Restaurant’, ‘Salam Noodles’ and ‘CIQ China Imam Qin Restaurant’ in the Kuala Lumpur region. As of early 2016, there are 14 branches of ‘Authentic Heritage Pulled Noodle Restaurant’ and six outlets of ‘Salam Noodles’ in Malaysia. This trend reflects the growing numbers of Hui migrants into Malaysia—and into Southeast Asia.

The ethnic Hui have had a long existence in Malaysia (Ma 2010).<sup>1</sup> However, the recent increase started only started in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Many are primarily from the northwestern parts in China, who have chosen Malaysia for furthering their studies. Some come as businessmen or religious scholars. Many congregate and live in Gombak, a neighborhood close to the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) in Kuala Lumpur. Some also run shops selling Islamic clothing that are imported from China, open restaurants serving Hui cuisine, operate websites on Islam in Mandarin, and participate in the activities of Chinese-style mosques.

The migration of the Hui to Malaysia is part of a larger migratory movement of mainland Chinese to Southeast Asia. Given that they are an official ethnic minority in their home country and share a religion with the majority group in Malaysia, Hui migrants often have personal experiences and establish business networks that are quite different from those of other recent Chinese migrants.<sup>3</sup> Many Hui migrants understandably prefer a Muslim-majority or Muslim-friendly destination in which they can learn and practice Islam while looking for business opportunities. In other words, their business activities tend to intersect with their religious commitments. This is a not an uncommon situation for Muslim migrants across different regions and historical periods.

By examining the establishment of Hui restaurants and Hui participation in Chinese-style mosques, this paper explores the intersection of their translocal mobility, economic aspirations and religious activities. As ethnicity and religiosity are highly interwoven in Malaysia (all Malays are constitutionally Muslim, and most Chinese are non-Muslims), the presence of Hui Muslims not only challenge the equation of Malays with Muslims, but also

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<sup>1</sup> Ma, Rosey Wang, “Chinese Muslims in Malaysia, History and Development”, *Light of Islam*, 8 November 2010, available at <[www.islamhk.com/en/?p=12&a=view&r=43](http://www.islamhk.com/en/?p=12&a=view&r=43)>.

<sup>2</sup> The increase in Hui migrants is noticed to be higher in Malaysia than in Indonesia. The English- and Mandarin-speaking environment, the well-established international Islamic tertiary education system, and the relatively developed economy are among the main factors given for why Malaysia is a more desirable destination for Hui Muslims.

<sup>3</sup> The ethnic differences between Hui and Han are problematic and contested. ‘Hui’ does not refer to a homogeneous group, and the term has had different meanings in different historical periods. Hui identities are also expressed diversely in different local contexts in China. In this paper, I use ‘Hui’ in a broad sense to refer to Mandarin-speaking Muslims originating from China.

conjures new sites for inter-communal interaction. By working together with the local minority Chinese Muslims, Hui Muslims have also contributed to the formation of Chinese Muslim cultural identities.

## NEW MIGRANTS

It is important to clarify the difference between the terms “Chinese Muslims” and “Hui Muslims.” This paper uses the term “Hui” mainly to refer to Mandarin-speaking born-Muslims from China, while “Chinese Muslims” is used to refer to Chinese Malaysians who have embraced Islam. Most Chinese Muslims in Malaysia today are the third or fourth generation of non-Muslim Chinese migrants from southeastern China. Meanwhile, many contemporary Hui migrants are originally from northwestern China. The Hui people are not new to Southeast Asia; however their recent and sizeable influx to Malaysia only began in the late 1980s.

Noticeable Hui presence in Malaysia began with student mobility. This is a recent phenomenon that has become a key feature of Chinese migration to Malaysia. There is currently no official figure for Hui migrants in Malaysia, but it is estimated that there are about 2,000 Hui individuals and 50 Hui families living in Malaysia.<sup>4</sup> A recent survey of 888 mainland Chinese students in various universities and colleges in Malaysia found that about 13.9% of them are Hui.<sup>5</sup> An informant also suggested that of an estimated 10,000 Chinese students in Malaysia today, 15% are Hui. This figure is high when compared to their 2.5% share of the total population of China.

Hui students pursue their studies (of both religious and modern subjects) at public universities and private colleges, with a high proportion being registered at the International Islamic University of Malaysia. After the completion of their studies, some Hui students stay in Malaysia to develop their careers and business activities, while others, upon their return to China, move from the Muslim heartland in the Northwest to the country’s commercial coastal cities, where they are largely engaged in the import-export trade and service industries.<sup>6</sup> In addition to students, there has recently been a growing number of religiously motivated and economically driven Hui migrants moving to Malaysia. They come intending to learn about Islam, to act as an imam (religious leader), or simply to live in a Muslim-majority environment. Some seek job opportunities or hope to expand their

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the approximately 2,000 Hui people living in Malaysia live alone as students, or are individuals who initially came as students, or businesspeople; as a result they are excluded from the group titled ‘Hui families’. There are no data available about the number of Hui migrants in Indonesia.

<sup>5</sup> Wong, Diana and Ooi, Pei Wen. “The Globalization of Tertiary Education and Intra-Asian Student Mobility: mainland Chinese Student Mobility to Malaysia”. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, Vol. 22, no. 1 (2013), p. 55–76.

<sup>6</sup> Wong, Diana and Zhang Huan-ping. 2013. “Muslim Mobility and the New Chinese Migration: A case-study of Hui Mobility in Malaysia”. *Overseas Chinese History Studies*, Issue 2 (2013), p. 13–29.

business networks. This might be in response to two current trends noticed among the Hui in China. First, there has been a religious awakening among Hui youths, leading some of them to further their studies in Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Second, there has been an increasing number of Hui businesspeople who are eager to build business networks in Muslim-majority countries. In many cases, both religious motivation and economic aspiration co-exist.

## RELIGION AND BUSINESS

Recently, the Ningxia Autonomous Region in China—which has a large concentration of Muslims—has been designated by its government to be China’s production centre for halal food. Such initiatives are a key strategy that can improve China’s global image, especially where improving foreign relations and business opportunities with the Arab and Muslim world is concerned. The Hui are apparently viewed as cultural ambassadors and as an important ‘asset’ that can represent China’s national interests and goodwill in Muslim-majority countries.<sup>7</sup>

The state of Kelantan has been ruled since 1990 by the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), and being an opposition party from the point of view of the federal government, the state does not receive full financial support from Putrajaya. Recently, in response to this dire situation, Kelantan has made efforts to attract investment from both Hui and Han entrepreneurs in mainland China, such as organizing the 2010 Cheng Ho Expo (Kelantan-China International Trade Fair) and the 2011 Kelantan Cheng Ho International Food Festival (KELCHEF). In 2011, the Kelantan government signed a memorandum of understanding with the Qinghai Yijiale Halal Supermarket in order to promote business collaboration between Kelantan and Qinghai.<sup>8</sup> In addition, since 2000, Hui entrepreneurs from China have actively taken part in various halal food and product exhibitions in Malaysia.

Since 2013, there has been collaboration between Malaysia’s East Coast Economic Region Development Council (ECERDC) and China’s Ningxia Light and Textile Industrial Bureau (NLTIB) to develop a regional halal food-manufacturing hub in the Malaysian state of Pahang.<sup>9</sup> As China embarks on its ambitious strategy of ‘One Belt, One Road’, it is likely that China’s interaction with Muslim-majorities countries where the Hui Muslims can play an important role will increase. This present study looks at translocal Hui business and religious activities, but focuses on small-scale and individual Hui entrepreneurs in Malaysia.

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<sup>7</sup> Ho, Wai-Yip. “Mobilizing the Muslim Minority for China’s Development: Hui Muslims, Ethnic Relations and Sino-Arab Connections”. *Journal of Comparative Asian Development*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (2012), p. 84–112.

<sup>8</sup> Buletin Darulnaim. “Usahawan Kelantan Dipelawa Pasar Produk Halal di China” (Halal Markets in China Welcome Kelantanese Entrepreneurs). *Buletin Darulnaim*, May 2011, p. 16-31.

<sup>9</sup> “Ningxia and Malaysia’s ECER Reach Deal to Explore Halal Investments”, *Halal Focus*, 4 January 2013, available at <<http://halalfocus.net/ningxia-malaysias-ecer-reaches-deal-to-explore-halal-investments/>>.

The notion of personal piety is important to many overseas Hui businesspersons and some of them participate in various religious activities alongside their business undertakings. The concept of “translocal pious entrepreneurialism” may therefore be helpful in understanding the relationship between mobility, entrepreneurialism and religion amongst Hui migrants.<sup>10</sup> The use of the term “translocal” is preferred to “transnational” for at least two reasons. First, translocality is a concept that can better capture the interactions between places and people beyond the paradigm of the nation state and globalization.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, it does not deny the role of the nation-state and global capitalism in such interactions. Second, Hui mobility involves various translocal pathways traversing different cities within a nation state, as well as pathways that reach beyond the nation state. For example, respondent Mr. Hassan Wang who is originally from Yunnan Province (China) studied in Chiang Mai (Thailand) and now runs a grocery shop in Kota Bahru (Malaysia) selling products imported from Guangdong (China).

## HUI RESTAURANTS

In recent years, the number of Hui restaurants have been rapidly increasing in Kuala Lumpur. These are very popular among the middle class Muslims. In China, Hui restaurants are often considered Hui cultural centres, a perception that can be attributed to the fact that the restaurants observe halal regulations; the fact that the Hui population are often dispersed throughout most cities; and the fact that they are important venues where socio-economic positions can be mediated. In Beijing and other Chinese cities, Hui involvement in halal restaurants is crucial to both their economic survival and the maintaining of the identity.<sup>12</sup> In Kuala Lumpur, as illustrated in the following two case studies, Hui restaurants play a similar role, as sites where Hui migrants can sustain their identity, and as a place for preaching Islam and making a living.

Yahya Liu was originally from Gansu Province but later moved to Shenzhen. He ran a few Hui restaurants in mainland China but later moved to Malaysia together with his brother in order to expand his business. In 2013, Yahya opened the first “Salam Noodles Restaurant” in Cyberjaya, a township close to Kuala Lumpur, by cooperating with a local Chinese Muslim. His restaurant serves food that is marketed as Hui cuisine, but is really a mixture of northwestern Chinese and Uighur dishes, such as Lanzhou hand-pulled noodles and Xinjiang grilled meat. He saw this restaurant as a starting point for an ambitious plan to

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<sup>10</sup> Hew, Wai Weng. “Translocal Pious Entrepreneurialism: Hui Business and Religious Activities in Malaysia and Indonesia”. *How Chinese Engagements Are Changing Southeast Asia: People, Money, Ideas and their Effects*, edited by Pál Nyíri and Danielle Tan. Seattle: The University of Washington Press (Forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup> Freitag, Ulrike, and Achim v. Oppen. Eds. *Translocality – The Study of Globalising Phenomena from a Southern Perspective*. Leiden: Brill (2010).

<sup>12</sup> Gladney, Dru C. 1993. “Hui Urban Entrepreneurialism in Beijing: State Policy, Ethnoreligious Identity and the Chinese City”. *Urban Anthropology in China*, edited by Greg Guldin and Aidan Southall, p. 278–307. Leiden: Brill (1993).

open more branches. At the time of writing, there are six outlets of ‘Salam Noodles’ in Malaysia.<sup>13</sup>

Also originally from Gansu, Imam Ishaq Qin served as an Imam in a local mosque, and first visited Kuala Lumpur in 2008 to attend a religious course. In 2009, he moved to Malaysia to further his studies in Arabic literature at IIUM. In order to support himself, he ran a small food stall at the university canteen. In 2012, he opened a restaurant, “Imam Qin Restaurant”, later renamed to “CIQ Cina Imam Qin Restaurant”, selling Hui dishes such as the Lanzhou hand-pulled noodles. The restaurant has attracted both Chinese and non-Chinese, Muslims and non-Muslim Malaysians. He saw his restaurant not only as a business, but also a venue for Islamic preaching (*dakwah*), a place where he could share thoughts with his customers, both non-Muslim Chinese and Malay Muslims. The restaurant gave credence to the idea that “converting to Islam does not mean that one has to lose one’s Chinese cultural identity”.<sup>14</sup>

## CHINESE-STYLE MOSQUES

Interactions with the Hui are also reflected in the articulation of histories (linked to the Chinese Admiral Zheng He) and in mosque architecture.<sup>15</sup> Inspired by the architectural design of ancient mosques in China, such as the Niujie Mosque in Beijing and the Great Mosque in Xi’an, there is currently a trend of building Chinese-style mosques in Malaysia. This trend are vivid attempts at declaring that “there can be a Chinese way of being Muslim”. New Chinese-style mosques include the Al-Saadah Mosque Complex in Seremban, the Muhammadiyah Mosque in Ipoh, and the Sultan Petra Ismail Mosque in Kelantan. While these were built by religious authorities to serve Chinese converts, they are not exclusive, as many Malay Muslims also frequently visit them. The lack of local Chinese Muslims with both profound Islamic knowledge and proficiency in the Chinese language was remedied by the Hui Muslims from China. For example, Imam Ali from Yunnan and Imam Yu from Gansu were invited by local Muslims to serve as imams in these new mosques.

In Seremban, a town about an hour’s drive from Kuala Lumpur, a Chinese New Year dinner celebration was held in 2013 inside the Al-Saadah Mosque Complex. Dressed in traditional Chinese clothing, Abu Bakar Siddiq, an imam from mainland China known as Imam Yu, recited the *doa* (prayers) at the beginning of the event. At the same time, his wife set up a small stall next to the dinner venue for selling various products that were mostly imported from China. Imam Yu, originally from Gansu, was introduced on that occasion by a Hui businessman from Kuala Lumpur to the chairman of the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) of the state of Sarawak, East Malaysia. Imam Yu went off to work

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<sup>13</sup> Interview, Yahya Liu, 19 February 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, Imam Qin, 5 February 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Hew, Wai Weng. “Hybrid Mosques: Mixing Islam and ‘Chineseness’ in Malaysia and Indonesia”. *TAASA Review: The Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia*. Vol 22, Issue 2 (2013), p. 17-19.

for two and a half years as a religious teacher in Kuching, Sarawak, where he gave regular classes and counseling on Islamic matters in Mandarin to new Chinese converts. In 2013, he moved to Seremban to serve as imam for a newly established mosque. This mosque was also the first mosque in contemporary Malaysia to conduct Friday sermons in Mandarin, which were led by Imam Yu. The Friday sermons also had on-screen simultaneous translations to Malay.<sup>16</sup>

In Kelantan, Imam Ali was an imam for the Sultan Petra Ismail Mosque, also known as the Beijing Mosque. He led the Ramadan *terawih* prayers (non-obligatory prayers during the month of Ramadan) there in 2010. In 2013, although he no longer worked as an imam for the mosque, Imam Ali still taught at an Islamic college in Kota Bahru. Originally from Yunnan, he left his home country in 1995 and studied at a college in Terengganu for three years before moving to Kelantan for work. His wife Fatimah, who is also from Yunnan, ran a small stall at a local market during weekends, selling various imported items from China. Recently, Imam Ali's eldest son Hassan also moved to Kota Bahru and opened a retail shop.<sup>17</sup>

### **ONENUR INTERNET RADIO**

Born in Jilin Province, Zainab Zhao moved to Malaysia in 2000. She studied English at a college in the northern Malaysian state of Perlis, before pursuing her BA in Accounting at IIUM in Kuala Lumpur. She married an ethnic Hui originally from Gansu province. Zainab Zhao began running a Muslim wholesale and retail business together with her husband in 2006, selling religious clothing and accessories. Most of the products were imported from mainland China. As of 2014, they had two stores in Kuala Lumpur and had plans to expand their business to Jakarta.<sup>18</sup>

Zainab Zhao did not see her identity as a Chinese and a Muslim, or as a pious person and a business-minded individual as contradictory. In her business dealings, she interacted with both Malay Muslims and non-Muslim Chinese. Aside from her business, Zainab was also a committed activist within the Hui circle. Together with other Hui migrants, she established a new Hui organisation, the Overseas Chinese Muslim Association (OCMA) and planned to extend its membership to the Hui in other countries, from Indonesia to the United States. In 2013, the OCMA held various Chinese New Year Open House celebrations in Kuala Lumpur and its surroundings in collaboration with Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) and other Muslim organizations. This was a subtle way of preaching Islamic messages among non-Muslim Chinese Malaysians. Zainab is also the executive director of a newly established internet radio station, OneNur, whose motto is "Advocating World

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<sup>16</sup> Interview, Imam Yu, 16 February 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Imam Ali, 17 September 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, Zainab Zhao, 5 February 2013.

Harmony”.<sup>19</sup> OneNur is the first Malaysia-based Mandarin Internet radio station, and features news, features, and information about Islam.

## CONCLUSION

The presence of the Hui migrants I described above has challenged the widely held perception among both Chinese and Muslim Malaysians that “Chinese-ness” and Islam are incompatible to a certain extent. This in turn has given many local Chinese Muslims more confidence to express their identity. While the Chinese Muslims in Malaysia are mostly Han converts and are ethnically different from Hui Muslims,<sup>20</sup> they tend to make reference to Hui traditions in an effort to manifest their unique ethno-religious identity. For example, they build Chinese-style mosques that are inspired by the architectural design of old mosques found in mainland China. They also often promote the history of Zheng He with the intention to show the long-established presence of Chinese Muslims in Malaysia. Chinese converts have also had close relations with Hui Muslim students and migrants, and often organize religious and social activities together. In addition, some Hui Muslims also provide religious courses in Mandarin to Chinese converts. For example, Muhammad Jumaat, a PhD student at the Science University of Malaysia, gave weekly lessons about Islam in Mandarin to new converts in Penang in 2013.

The abovementioned cases also show that mobility, business interests, and religious activities go hand in hand for many Hui migrants. For example, Imam Qin owned a restaurant in addition to his work as a religious teacher, while Zainab Zhao was active in Hui socio-religious networks in addition to running a clothing business. Islamic identity has bonded many overseas Hui people together. Islam also played an important role for their business and daily engagements, as they have frequent interactions with local Muslims in both realms. At the same time, their knowledge of Chinese has allowed the Hui to foster greater interactions with Chinese Malaysians through their trading, preaching, and social activities. The Hui Muslims also maintain various connections, be they familial, religious, or business-related, with mainland China. Thus, we can frame the contemporary overseas mobility and business networks of the Hui people as both Chinese and Muslim at the same time—and, perhaps, as an intersection of both ethnic and religious networking processes.

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<sup>19</sup> According to the introduction on OneNur’s website, its name “Olive Lantern” is inspired by Quranic verses. See <http://onenur.net/index.php/guanyuwomenhome>.

<sup>20</sup> During my fieldwork, I also closely observed how “Chineseness” took on different meanings and connotations for the local Chinese Muslims and Hui migrants. This was reflected in differences in dialects, food, cultural celebrations, citizenship, and so on.

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