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# Ethnographic Encounters with Muslims in Taiwan: Exploration of their Religious Scenes and Experiences

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## Abstract

Recently, the Taiwanese government launched a landmark initiative called the New Southbound Policy to significantly extend its economic and cultural ties to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Australia. Along with the New Southbound Policy, Taiwan seeks to forge both a national identity and a sense of cohesion by fostering multiculturalism, through which they promote the recognition of different cultural traditions and heritages, including those of migrants. To put it succinctly, Taiwan is increasingly opening its doors to foreign countries in order to sustain itself both economically and culturally. As a result, growing numbers of migrants are moving to Taiwan, especially from Southeast Asian countries, mostly notably Indonesia, a country known to have the largest Muslim population in the world.

This paper highlights some aspects of the religious development of Islam in the city of Kaohsiung with contributions from both locals and Indonesians by presenting the life stories and experiences of Muslims that I encountered during fieldwork. In doing so, this paper attempts to convey to the reader the religious sentiments through which these individuals experience their everyday lives in Kaohsiung.

**Key Words:** Islam, Migrants, Globalization, Taiwan (Kaohsiung), Anthropology

## 1. Introduction

Globalization has galvanized the flow of capital, resources, and products throughout the world and has changed the lifestyles of those who have been affected by it. These changes, at the same time, have entailed and increased the movements and interactions of people, ideas, and technologies that are in nature shifting and contingent (Ong and Collier 2005). The present work brings attention to a county/state that, under the growing influence of neighboring China, is undergoing substantial changes with regard to cultural traditions: Taiwan. Recently, the Taiwanese government launched a landmark initiative called the New Southbound Policy to significantly extend its economic and cultural ties to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Australia. To put it succinctly, Taiwan is increasingly opening its doors to foreign countries in order to sustain itself both economically and culturally. As

a result, growing numbers of migrants are moving to Taiwan, especially from Southeast Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. According to the latest statistics provided by Taiwan's National Immigration Agency in 2018,<sup>1</sup> the largest percentage of foreign residents in Taiwan migrated from Indonesia, followed by Vietnam and the Philippines.

Along with the New Southbound Policy, Taiwan seeks to forge both a national identity and a sense of cohesion by fostering multiculturalism, through which they promote the recognition of different cultural traditions and heritages, including those of migrants (Cheng and Fell 2014). In this light, examining the emerging cultural traditions of Taiwan helps elucidate some aspects of globalization that are opening up its society. Religious traditions are of particular interest, since the number of Muslims in Taiwan is on the rise with the recent waves of migration from Indonesia, a country known to have the largest population of Muslims in the world. This paper highlights some aspects of the religious development of Islam in the city of Kaohsiung with contributions from both locals and Indonesians by presenting the life stories and experiences of Muslims that I encountered during fieldwork. In doing so, this paper attempts to convey to the reader the religious sentiments through which these individuals experience their everyday lives in Kaohsiung, utilizing an anthropological approach called "thick description" pioneered by Clifford Geertz (1973).

This preliminary study is based on fieldwork that took place in Kaohsiung in September of 2018 for two weeks, during which I visited the grand mosque in the city as well as several Indonesian restaurants for interviews and ethnographic observation. Interviews, both structured and unstructured, were conducted in Chinese and English.

## 2. Visiting the Grand Mosque in Kaohsiung

The grand mosque is located in the south part of the city and is accessible by train and car. The mosque is available to the public during their office hours (from 4:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.) with its gates open. The mosque manager is a 63-year-old male born in Myanmar and raised in mainland China. He moved from the mainland to Taiwan in his late 30s. With his distinguished long, gray beard and frequent references to religious phrases, it immediately became clear that he is a pious Muslim. Using his fluent British English, he welcomed our

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<sup>1</sup> *National Immigration Agency*

(<https://www.immigration.gov.tw/lp.asp?ctNode=29986&CtUnit=16677&BaseDSD=7&mp=2>, accessed October 30, 2018)

visit to the mosque and gave us an improvised tour of the mosque. The main unit of this three-story building is a 50-square-meter prayer room with a high ceiling used for ceremonial gatherings such as Friday prayer and yearly Islamic events. He explained that the ground portion of the room is usually for male use and that a separate space just right above it is available for females. In order to pray or celebrate occasions together, both males and females use this room, but sit in designated sections. He told us that 150 to 180 Muslim faithful, mostly Indonesians, usually come to the mosque for weekly Friday prayer gatherings. The highlight of the year, he explained, is the occasion of *eid*<sup>2</sup> when between 800 and 1,000 people gather together for celebration.

During his guided tour, one of the points he stressed was that the mosque tries not to become isolated from mainstream society and tries to maintain ties with local communities. For example, they use both Islamic and Chinese lunar calendars to promote local events such as the Chinese full-moon celebration in the mosque. Prayer instruction brochures in Chinese were available in the bookshelf in the entrance hall. Referring to these materials, the manager emphasized that Muslims must learn to work as good citizens and that they should not give society the false impression that Muslims only pray to God all the time. In fact, they put a golden plaque in the ballroom on which the importance of service to society, the nation, and the local community, as well as to the Islamic faith, was inscribed in bold. In the entrance hall, they also had a display of about 20 photos of children engaging in social and religious activities, a sign that they attempt to keep ties with local communities.

On a different day, a group of us came back to the mosque to observe a Friday prayer gathering. The event started around 12:15 p.m. Upon their arrival to the mosque, the participants entered the relevant prayer sections. The presence of numerous foreign nationals (i.e., non-Taiwanese) was striking, signaling that globalization is in full swing. Many of them, as the mosque manger had informed us, looked to be of Southeast Asian origin. Despite this notable presence, however, the appearance of the participants also looked very broad and diverse; the participants included males and females, young and old, and dark-skinned and light-skinned, those with mustache and/or beard and those without, those dressed with religious attire and those in non-religious (work and non-work) outfits. At the beginning, the male portion of the prayer room filled slowly and was still half empty. Inside the room, an *imam*, the prayer leader, was enthusiastically preaching in Arabic in front of the crowd.<sup>3</sup> To our surprise, the *imam* turned out to be the mosque manager. The manager, who wore

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<sup>2</sup> *Eid* is a religious holiday that marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting.

a casual cotton short-sleeve shirt and khaki pants in our last meeting, was dressed formally this time with a long white dress and a turban on his head. As his sermon proceeded, the size of the audience continued to grow. After 40 minutes, just around the time of the prayer, the room became almost full with about 200 participants. As soon as the prayers were over, the crowd began to disperse; this was around 1:05 p.m. The prayer room quickly became half empty again.

The visits to the mosque helped me visualize the kinds of religious spaces to which Muslims in Kaohsiung belong; the mosque is essentially available for anyone, regardless of their faith and nationality, and provides them with a home for religious and social occasions. Different groups or individuals were freely coming in and out with no particular presence of authority in the mosque at the time of Friday prayer. As “religion” has increasingly become a subject of disciplinary practice in modern times (Asad 1993), the ways in which the non-local faithful constitute a religious assemblage in a host country are of particular interest in the anthropological literature. These observations seemed to capture some capacious aspects of religious traditions in contemporary Taiwan developing against the milieu in which a greater degree of religious freedom is granted not only to Taiwanese but also to non-Taiwanese people.

After the prayer, some waited in a line to purchase *halal* meats in a room on the first floor, while some went to a restaurant next door. For interviews, I found some local Taiwanese people and a group of students who were chatting amongst themselves around the mosque entrance.



**Figure 1.** The grand mosque is the major religious center among Muslims in Kaohsiung. It hosts socio-religious events like Friday prayer on a regular basis, where a number of non-Taiwanese Muslims as well as locals gather together and affirm their religious faith.

<sup>3</sup> Although the content of his sermon on that day was not immediately available, the mosque manager later told me that his sermon was generally concerned with different ways to apply religious faith in one's daily life.

### 3. Viewpoints of Muslims in Kaohsiung

This section further expands on insights into Muslims in Taiwan by highlighting how the Muslims I met in the field view and experience Taiwanese society. After the Friday prayer, I was able to interview three Chinese Muslims and a group of about 50 Indonesian students who were staying around the mosque entrance. The three Chinese Muslims I spoke with were in their 50s, 80s and 90s, respectively. They are ethnic Huis and originally came from mainland China. In the midst of the political turmoil in the late 1940s, they decided to move to Taiwan. They have lived in Taiwan since that time. Among the Indonesians present, many were temporary workers at nearby tire-manufacturing factories, while some others were exchange students to Taiwan. One of them, an 18-year-old exchange student at Cheng Shiu University, answered most questions with his fluent English on behalf of the group. The exchange students who were present at the mosque, he explained, are beneficiaries of Taiwan's New Southbound Policy under which various study exchange programs have been initiated and arranged by Indonesia's Ministry of Education.

My questions for them concerned their life experiences in Taiwan as Muslims. Interestingly, the most challenging aspect of their lives turned out to be food. For example, the Indonesian student mentioned that it is burdensome to find nearby shops that sell *halal* foods in Kaohsiung, since *halal* food products are not readily available in stores like in Indonesia. Similarly, one of the Chinese Muslims also raised the same issue concerning food availability; he has no choice but to go shopping at certain places and purchase a large amount of *halal* food there at once. In addition to these food-related issues, the students also spoke about other practical challenges of living in Taiwan as a Muslim. For example, there is only one mosque in the city; not many prayer rooms are available in public places, including on the college campus; dogs, an animal considered unclean in Islamic traditions, are abundant in the city; and the water in the kitchen is too high to reach and therefore clean their feet for ablution before their daily prayers, among others.

Compared with mishaps experienced by religious minorities elsewhere (for example, Brown 2006; Mahmood 2016), it is noteworthy that none of their challenges concerned their religious practice *per se*. After all, they were smiling in the course of our conversation and acknowledged that they needed to adjust to the environment they live in now. When I asked them about difficulties with regard to their religious practice and activities, they did not particularly raise any points. In similar fashion, the Chinese Muslims told us that, despite practical difficulties, they have been guaranteed religious freedom and they have

been able to observe religious duties and have fully enjoyed regular get-togethers with friends in faith at the mosque, *halal* restaurants, and some other social events. Furthermore, the Indonesian students fondly shared with us about their college life in Kaohsiung; they are taking English-taught classes with and become friends with Taiwanese students; they help each other on course assignments; and they have begun to study Chinese language to learn more about Taiwan.

Additionally, I had opportunities to speak with other Muslims about their life experiences in Taiwan. The Indonesian students told us about a popular Indonesian restaurant in town and an “Indonesian district” in which the restaurant is located. Upon visiting the restaurant and district, I arranged a meeting and interview with the owner of that restaurant as well as two Indonesian students working at the restaurant. With a mix of Chinese and English, the owner recounted to us her life history in Taiwan. She first moved to Taiwan in 1993 and worked as a housekeeper. She was introduced to her Taiwanese husband by one of her Indonesian friends, and they got married in 1999. In 2009, she took a crucial step in opening up an Indonesian restaurant in the district. Targeting both Indonesian and local Taiwanese customers, she has successfully managed the restaurant since then; she recently opened a new branch in an upscale part of Kaohsiung. The two students working at the restaurant are in their early 20s and are Master’s students whose study concentrations are civil engineering and business administration. Both of them eloquently spoke English and told us that they had studied English in Indonesia. They had moved to Taiwan two months prior to our visit with little preparation in Chinese, however.



**Figure 2.** The “Indonesian district” in central Kaohsiung accommodates numerous shops and restaurants for Indonesians. One of the restaurants (center) is particularly popular among the interviewees. The menu (right) is written in Indonesian, English, and Chinese, suggesting that the restaurant serves customers of different nationalities.

In parallel to the accounts given by those I spoke with in the mosque, while obtaining *halal* food has been their main challenge, no major obstacles interfere with their practicing Islam. The restaurant manager is careful about securing *halal* meats by importing them

from overseas, especially from Australia, since they are not conveniently available domestically. The students also expressed concern about the consumption of pork in Taiwan, saying that they might accidentally eat pork in public places. Despite these nuisances, however, they remain hopeful for their future prospects. Over the last twenty years, the manager has been able to expand her networks in Taiwan by connecting with in-laws, business partners, customers, and friends in-faith. She enjoys visiting the grand mosque once a week on Fridays and thereby maintains social ties with the participants on a regular basis. She proudly showed me a You Tube video in which she was featured as a model Muslim on an educational program coordinated by the Taiwanese government. The students were eager to pursue their studies in their respective programs with the prospect of taking their knowledge back to Indonesia. Although they mentioned that they are occasionally frustrated with Taiwanese students' random questions about the Islamic faith, they have attempted to overcome language and cultural barriers by organizing student groups or study groups.

The life experiences of the Muslims I encountered in the field illuminate some aspects of a religious tradition forming through the interactions between locals and non-locals. Their challenges remind us that Muslims are indeed living as a religious minority in Taiwan. Yet, the same life stories also indicate that their religious faith continues to evolve in such a way that they maintain their core practices under the constraints of the changing local contexts.

#### 4. Reflections & Concluding Remarks

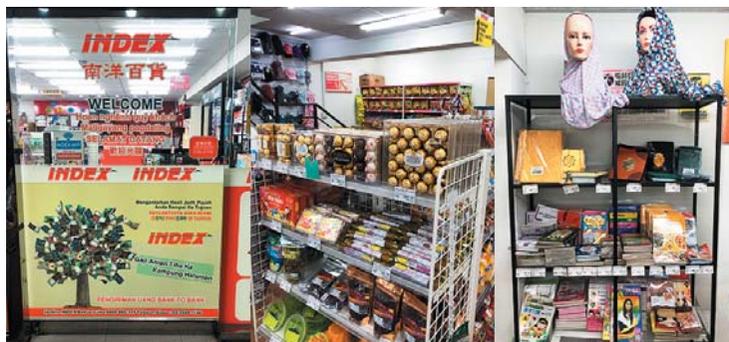
Although it is admittedly naïve to assume that no faith-related problems exist among the interviewees, the life experiences above can be read as a reflection of Taiwan's cultural and political climate in which multiculturalism is nurtured. The present work concludes with an ethnographic encounter that showcases some of the ways in which the Taiwanese government is attempting to promote different religious faiths.

Upon visiting the mosque, I witnessed, by chance, the kinds of efforts the Taiwanese government is exerting to foster multiculturalism. An employee from one of the three governmental publishers was also present that day. He is working for the publisher called *Han Lin* (翰林),<sup>4</sup> a well-known company which mainly publishes textbooks for primary and sec-

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hle.com.tw>

ondary schools. The employee was filming the mosque and Friday prayer; he was there to capture and video-record some images of Islamic tradition in Taiwan, because, he said, the publisher is currently in the process of compiling the religious sections of elementary school textbooks. When I inquired about criteria for coverage compilation, he shared with me some key points to be considered as follows: 1) to introduce Islamic traditions as objectively as possible; 2) to present the basics of faith, since the Islamic religion is still relatively new to, yet is increasingly becoming prominent in Taiwan; 3) to demonstrate examples of mixtures of cultures through religious practice, such as the languages of Chinese, Indonesia, and English; and 4) to depict Islamic traditions in ways that encourage students to cultivate a sense of mutual understanding of different cultural traditions. The encounter with this employee, although accidental, helped me envision some concrete ways that the Taiwanese government is engaging with multiculturalism on the ground. Furthermore, the key points the employee enumerated hinted at the growing presence of Islam in Taiwan as well as the direction in which the government is moving in respect to heterogeneous religious traditions. Nevertheless, an insufficiency of background knowledge about Taiwan and the language barriers in the field inevitably prevented me from fully capturing and comprehending the complexities of recent religious developments in the region. In this regard, further research on genealogies of religions in Taiwan will be necessary and fruitful, which work I hope to continue to pursue in the future.



**Figure 3.** This general merchandise shop was located near the “Indonesian district” (Figure 2). They sell various goods from snacks and drinks to ethnic clothes at a discounted price, especially for migrant customers from Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines. They also handle shipping and money transfer. Religious items (right) are also displayed in the basement of the store.

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