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Hew Wai Weng, *Chinese ways of being Muslim; Negotiating ethnicity and religiosity in Indonesia*

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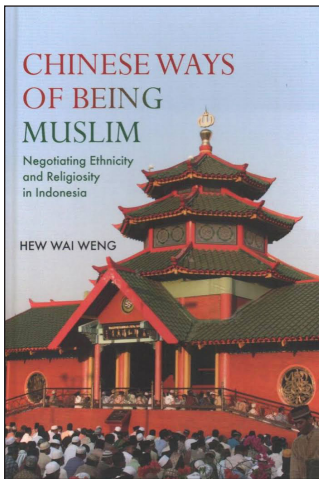
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Book review

Hew Wai Weng, *Chinese ways of being Muslim; Negotiating ethnicity and religiosity in Indonesia*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, [NIAS Monographs 140.], 2018, xxvi + 305 pp. ISBN 978-87-7694-2113. Price: GBP 22.50 (softcover).



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Everything changed for the better for the Chinese in general and Chinese Muslims in particular in Indonesia after 1999. The credit for this must go to President Abdurrahman Wahid who at one sweep made it again respectable to proclaim one's Chinese heritage, and indeed even to flaunt it, up to a point, in cultural celebrations, especially those surrounding Chinese New Year. Hew Wai Weng's book implicitly acknowledges this by confining itself largely to what has been happening since that momentous shift in public perceptions. To put the current situation into some historical context, there is a chapter discussing the historiography of fifteenth-century Muslim Chinese encounters with the Javanese, but the point of the chapter is not so much to recount the history, but to demonstrate how it is used in the present-day almost as a charter-myth by some Chinese Muslims: the past to justify the present.

During the New Order period under President Suharto, Chinese Indonesians had been under considerable pressure to "mix in" (*pembauran*) with the non-Chinese Indonesian population, in order that they might become totally assimilated, losing their history, their traditions, their language, their associations, their distinctive celebrations, and artistic performances and even their characteristic Chinese names along the way. Some Chinese were prepared to work with this policy, seeing it as offering the best way for future generations of Chinese Indonesians to avoid the discrimination that they themselves had experienced. As part of their efforts in this direction some advocated conversion to Islam as the most effective way of moving towards *pembauran*. As it turned out, the strategy was not so successful as had been

hoped, and in the violent anti-Chinese riots of 1998 Chinese Muslims, too, were targeted.

This is the background against which Hew Wai Weng sets his comprehensive ethnographic description of the development of Chinese Muslim communities in the post-Suharto period. On the basis of extended fieldwork, especially in Surabaya and Jakarta but also in other sites, observing and attending numerous events and celebrations, and interviewing not only leading personalities, but also rank and file members of different organisations, he presents the reader with fascinating and instructive insights into the life of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia today. In different chapters focusing on specific features of communal life he demonstrates the pluralism of practice and the fluidity of the orientation of those who regard themselves as Chinese Muslims. The chapter on mosque constructions designed to display Chinese architectural features, for example, not only discusses those features, but provides a sociologically detailed account of who the congregations are that attend such mosques – not only Chinese but large numbers of non-Chinese too – the funding of the constructions and how mosque space can incorporate reference to Chinese customs.

Another chapter describes in detail the plethora of new Chinese Muslim preachers and their relative popularity, a phenomenon that he describes as a movement from *pembauran* to *dakwah* (preaching), from passive to active engagement on the part of converts. Here the author makes a point of drawing the contrast between various individuals and groups in terms of their attitudes to current issues discussed in general Muslim circles. Some preachers advocate tolerance and openness to other religions, others are polemically exclusive in their preaching. The theoretical point drawn from the multiplicity of attitudes and behaviours that are described is that it would be a grievous mistake to think that Chinese Muslims constitute a single homogenous bounded group, a point that is stressed several times, and in relation to which the author makes excellent use of the theoretical literature, in particular, profiting from the insights of Brubaker and Kahn among others. Not only do individual preachers differ in their attitudes and beliefs, but the several organisations that exist also have their different orientations. The chapter on conversions makes this point very clearly; there is a variety of motives leading people to convert, and, consequently, converts, that is the majority of Chinese Muslims, will take up Muslim practices and beliefs in differing ways, some more orthodox than others. One point that is usefully brought to the reader's attention here is that in the various debates about orthopraxy – whether, for example, it is permissible to wish Christians “Merry Christmas” – the debaters take their cue from already existing positions among the wider Muslim community rather than generate their own apologetics.

This leaning on what is already available in the literature of current controversies is not the case with the vexed question of whether Chinese Muslims should celebrate Chinese New Year, a subject that of course presents unique problems, the description of which takes up another chapter, but

there are interesting parallels and divergences with attitudes to the "Merry Christmas" issue. Those who oppose giving the greeting to Christians argue that to do so is to acknowledge the truth of Christianity. In the same way those who are opposed to the continuing celebration of Chinese New Year by Chinese Muslims make the case that such celebrations are acknowledging the truth of non-Muslim beliefs. In both cases appeals are made to leading non-Chinese Muslim authorities to corroborate the several opinions. The consensus of authoritative figures in this case appears to accept that the Chinese New Year celebrations are not religious but cultural, and therefore acceptable.

The heterogeneity that Hew Wai Weng describes in such telling detail, referring - sometimes rather repetitively, it must be said, as good editing would have noted - to interviews and conversations, and enlivening his account with informative anecdotes, is not confined to the difference between groups or even individuals. One of the most arresting points he makes relates to the inconsistency of belief and practice within one individual. Of course, it comes as no surprise to an anthropologist that there is an inconsistency between what a person says and what a person does. It is rare, however, that one sees it documented so startlingly. In accounting for the phenomenon Hew Wai Weng comes up with what, I think, is a wonderful concept, "flexible piety". By this is meant precisely the readiness of individuals to adapt habits and stated beliefs to fit the circumstances in which they find themselves. Consequently, they behave one way in public and another in private, one way when they are preaching, another in the privacy of a circle of friends. At one level this might be considered hypocrisy, at another, a pragmatic appraisal of the demands of local circumstances and a reflection of a strong belief that such deviations as they may be accused of by the orthodox, do not impair the sincerity of their fundamental commitment to their religion: a common enough feature of religious behaviour throughout the world.

Chinese ways of being Muslim is richly detailed, comprehensive account of what is happening in Chinese Muslim communities in Indonesia today. To see it simply as ethnographic documentation, however, would be to do it an injustice. The thoughtful analysis of the events and personalities described, and the variety of theoretical issues brought into play to illuminate our understanding will prompt readers to reflect more keenly on the complexity of the situation in which Chinese Muslims find themselves in Indonesia today.