The Chinese Muslim Community: Their Economic, Political and Social Involvement in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the involvement and activities of the Chinese Muslim community in Malaysian socio-economic and political scenarios. It also highlights the early history of the Chinese Muslim community since their early arrival in Malaysia till the present. This study seeks to identify the dakwah role and activities of the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) for the Malaysian society. This qualitative study finds that the Chinese Muslim community is involved in businesses such as restaurants mostly operating in the Klang Valley. Other than that, they work as professionals, teachers and administrators. In the political field, there is no single organization or specific body which represents the community, however, there are a few individuals directly involved such as Anuar Tan in Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS). At the same time, MACMA as an NGO is seen as the main initiative in representing the community, specifically in matters related to welfare and preserving their identity.

Key words: Chinese Muslim, economics, politics, social, Malaysia.

Introduction

The Chinese Muslim community has its own historical development, beginning with arrival of Admiral Cheng Ho in Malacca, the history of the Hui Hui ethnic in Terengganu, Koay clan in Penang and Tianjing Hui Hui in Sabah till the present. This development also increased with the conversion of many non-Muslim Chinese, the majority of whom are Buddhists. At the same time, they are also active in various fields such as economics, social and politics. MACMA has the role of representing them in welfare and dakwah matters whether to Muslims or non-Muslims. Thus, this study highlights their involvement and activities in the said fields in Malaysia.

Early Historical Development of Chinese Muslim:

Liang Liji (2009) in his study states that the first written record of this relation was contained in an ancient Chinese history book, Hou han Shu (116th volume) which means ‘Later Literature of Han Dynasty’. In this book, in the year Yong Jian, there was a diplomatic relation between Ye Diao Bian (Deravarma, in Sanskrit) and China whereby the King of Diao Bian had paid tribute to the Emperor of China and was reciprocated with a seal with clamp and purple tapestry fabric. This seems to be supported by the discovery of Chinese artefacts in Malaya such as carved stones similar to the burial stone of a Han Dynasty warrior. Besides that, in the year 1936, a Dutch scholar, discovered ceramic prayer instruments made during the time of the Han Dynasty. In early 15th Century, there were diplomatic ties between the Malay Sultanate of Malacca and the Ming Dynasty (Hing and Chee-Beng, 1999), during the time of Emperor Cheng Zhu (1403-1424) in China and Parameswara in Malacca. The Chinese emperor had sent an emissary named Yin Ch’ing to Malacca in the year 1403. It was reported that the Ming emperor had sent as gifts of royalty silk textile, silk apparel and a yellow umbrella. The Chinese Emperor recognized Parameswara as the legitimate ruler of Malacca and promised to...
protect Malacca from external threats, especially Siam. Subsequently, the ruler of Malacca reciprocated by royal visits to China in 1405 and 1407 (Purcell, 1967).

The Chinese mission to Malacca in 1403 and 1409 were for the purpose of recognizing the sovereignty of Malacca in the name of the Chinese Emperor. In the year 1405, the Chinese Emperor commanded Admiral Zheng He to lead a naval fleet to South-east Asia, South Asia and West Asia for a goodwill visit (Yuanzhi, 2010). The voyage was between the years 1405 and 1433 and covered other places in the Malay World such as Champa, Java and Sumatra as well as India, Ceylon as well as the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa (Hall, 1981). Admiral Zheng He brought with him the voyage Muslim scholars as language interpreters. In this regard, the powerful image of an important Muslim and the Islamic influence in the Chinese administration showed by Admiral Zheng He has more or less motivated Parameswara to approach Islam. Moreover, the Islamic kingdom of Pasai then made Parameswara comfortable with Islam (Sen, 2009). Ma Huan, a scholar who was in the expedition had recorded the story of the voyage in his work, Ying Ya Shen Lan which means 'Beautiful sceneries Across the Seas'. This great work is a strong proof of the presence of Chinese Muslims from China who came to the Malay World. Rosey Wang Ma (2003) states that in this expedition, many of the crew were Muslims. In the year 1770, a Chinese Muslim by the name of Song Shilin is said to have built a mosque called ‘Masjid Besar’ in Kampung Ulu, Melaka. Part of the materials for the construction of the mosque were imported from China and had distinct Chinese architecture, and this mosque is said to have influenced the architecture of other mosques in Malacca then (Baojun, 2004).

Ethnic Chinese Muslim originally from China in Malaysia:

Ethnic Hui Hui in Terengganu:

Hui Hui is the largest ethnic group, 10 million out of 30 million Chinese Muslims in the whole of China. The other ethnic groups include the Uighur, Tatar, Kazak, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Salar, Tajik, Bao’ian and Dongxiang. Hui Hui had also migrated to other countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Hong Kong where most of them were traders, labourers or victims of exploitation in their search for a better life. This ethnic has also a unique lifestyle as can be seen in their language, food, clothing, headgear for male and female, mosque, home cleanliness and honesty in business (Encyclopedia of Diasporas, 2004).

In Malaysia, the Hui Hui are better known as ‘Orang Yunan’ (Yunan people). The local society in Terengganu labelled them as such based on the assumption that the Chinese Muslim community originated from Yunnan, whereas they actually came from Guangzhou. However, the label is conveniently used to explain to the local society here their different identity from other Chinese. Tan Chee-Beng (1998) states: ‘The label ‘Orang Yunan’ came to use as a result of the settlers referring to the Yunnanese to explain their original Muslim status to the Malays that there were Muslims in Yunnan. Furthermore, most Chinese in Malaysia trace their origin to ancestors in Southern China (Fujian and Guandong) so that the Chinese the Malays meet are not Muslims. In fact even among the Chinese Malaysians themselves, few know that there were Muslims in Fujian and Guandong so that the Chinese in Kuala Terengganu (mainly Hokkien) also regard the Hui Hui there as people who came from Yunnan. Thus, the label ‘Yunnan’ has become a convenient label for the Hui Hui themselves whenever there is a need to explain their identity to both the Malays and non-Muslim Chinese’.

Koay Clan in Penang:

Another community or clan which is also from the Hui Hui ethnic group and who arrived at the end of the 19th Century is the ‘Koay’ clan. They were named after their ancestors, I-Pen Khu-Se Tek-Kwan-Kong or also known as ‘Koay Tek Kwan’. During the Ming Dynasty in the year 1376, Koay T’ng Hui brought a community of Arabic descendants to a village named ‘Pek Kee’ in Chuan Chew, Hui Aun (Huat, 2002). According to history, at the end of the 19th Century, the unstable political and economic conditions made worse by the interference of the Manchu government in the province of Fujian, caused many to migrate to areas in South-east Asia, such as Malaysia, Singapore and so on. In Penang, they faced problems with the Malay-Muslim majority such as problems of communication, cultural differences, and the shape of the mosque dome which made them feel isolated from the local Muslim majority.

Huat (2002) explains: ‘The notice stated that since early times, the Koays have been Muslims. They have been steadfast in their prayer, and have not changed for generations… after China became a republic, many of their clan came to Southeast Asia and were scattered all over Singapore and Malaysia. However, due to the great differences in human relations and environment, they gradually departed from the Islamic teaching. However in the practice of remembering their ancestors, they will strictly observe halal food (no pork). This shows that they are following the fatwa of the past, and that they have not forgotten their origins’.

The jetty they dwelled on was demolished in 2006 by the authorities. Even so, the efforts of the authorities had frequently been resisted by certain individuals or parties such as the late Haji Ibrahim Tien Ying Ma, Datuk
Mustapha Ma and Tunku Datuk Dr. Ismail Jewa (The Star) as well as the NGOs involved such as Penang Heritage Trust, Malaysian Nature Society, Malaysian Travel and Trade Associations, Penang Tourist Guides Associations, Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association, Sahabat Alam Malaysia and so on.

Etnik Tianjing Hui Hui di Sabah:

This community originated from Tianjing province, China. They came and settled in Sabah early in the 20th Century to work as labourers in farms and the railway service. There were four early families out of 108 families, who were brought to Sabah. They are Wang, Li, Hong and Guo. This ethnic group managed to preserve their Chinese identity because unlike in Peninsular Malaysia where Malays are the majority ethnic, there is multi ethnicity in Sabah. Sabah has more than eight ethnic groups each with its own culture and language. The largest ethnic group is the Kadazan-Dusun, followed by the Rungus, Bajau, Malay, Murut and so on (Ma, 2003).

The present Chinese Muslim Population in Malaysia:

The Chinese Muslim community in Malaysia may be categorized into two types: Chinese Muslims from China and, Chinese Muslims who are new converts to Islam (muallaf) whether through marriage with a Muslim or out of their own volition.

Chinese Muslim Population in Malaysia according to State/Province

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>State / Province</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Johore</td>
<td>4,074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Kedah</td>
<td>1,003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kelantan</td>
<td>1,525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Malacca</td>
<td>868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Negeri Sembilan</td>
<td>1,848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Pahang</td>
<td>1,002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Perak</td>
<td>1,367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Perlis</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Penang Island</td>
<td>1,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Sabah</td>
<td>9,591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Sarawak</td>
<td>4,037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Selangor</td>
<td>10,241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Trengganu</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Kuala Lumpur</td>
<td>3,838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Labuan</td>
<td>522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Putrajaya</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Malaysia</td>
<td>42,048</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (National Statistics Department, 2010-2011).

The table above shows the population of this community in the whole of Malaysia is 42,048 persons. They are seen as more focused in states such as Selangor at 10,241, Sabah 9,591, Sarawak 4,037 and Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur 3,838. However the total stated for the year 2010 at 42,048 shows a decline by as many as 15,173 persons compared to the statistics of the year 2000 at 57,227 persons. This total is seen as contradictory to general claims which logically estimates that the total should be between 70,000 to 100,000 persons. In addition, it also differs with the total of conversions of Chinese seen to be increasing yearly (Abdullah and Muhumad Shukri, 2008). An interview with a dakwah official of the Islamic Welfare Organisation of Malaysia or Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia (PERKIM) also finds that the number of conversions to Islam among the Chinese people is increasing each year (Pegawai Dakwah Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia, 2011). Thus, the researcher views that the relevant figure would be somewhere between 60,000 to 100,000 according to estimates by some prominent Chinese Muslims (Seng, 2011).

Chinese Muslim Involvement and Activities in Malaysia:

Economics:

From some of the early information obtained, the economic activities of the Chinese Muslims can be seen in a study by Tan Chee-Beng (1988) on the Hui Hui community in Terengganu in the year 1988. According to him, this community has been involved in business ever since their arrival in Malaya at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Three Chinese Muslim immigrants known as Pak Do, Pak Musa and Pak Ali were respectively called Pak Do Yuman, Pak Musa Yuman and Pak Ali Yuman. The three of them opened a medicine shop supplying medicine known as ‘Renji Tang’. Besides that, they also operated other businesses such as tin
ore, rice and a bookshop. The bookshop was named ‘Toko Abdullah Alyunani’. Further, a prominent Chinese, Haji Ibrahim Ma was a consulate of the Perak government. After several years here, he decided to permanently reside in Malaysia. He then ventured in rice milling and other businesses (Ma, 2003).

According to Ann Wan Seng, the Chinese Muslim community in Malaysia has its own economic position. Many of them had inherited businesses even before they became Muslims. After conversion, they still maintain involvement in business. However, they have changed their orientation in business, for example from a non-halal restaurant to a halal restaurant. Those involved in the business of production and processing of goods continue to do so.

In addition, there are also cases where after conversion, much of their business space was blocked due to boycott and opposition by the Chinese business community. However, this is the very group who venture into new fields of business. They are seen as trading in goods and products manufactured by Muslims from inside and outside the country, especially China (Seng, 2011).

Further, they are also involved in big businesses with large capitals, in various sectors and fields, such as retailing, textile, restaurants and so on. This development is most noticeable lately like mushrooms which grow after the rain, for example, in the halal Chinese food restaurant business which is rapidly developing in the Klang Valley such as Kuala Lumpur, Ampang, Bukit Antarabangsa, Hulu Kelang, Bukit Beruntung, Klang, Shah Alam and so on. The response from the surrounding society, specifically the Malays, has allowed these restaurants to develop rapidly. For example, Haji Sharin Low restaurant has seven branches in Klang Valley within a short period of two years (Utusan Malaysia, 2011). Similarly, Mohd Chan Abdullah restaurant has eight branches and Haji Yusuf Ong restaurant has two branches in Shah Alam named Chinese Muslim al-Munawwarah Restaurant.

There are a few factors which have contributed to their success. First, the fact that they have inherited the skills of doing business traditionally from their families, they only have to continue the business what was already started earlier. Second, their success is also due to their status as new converts, which earned them support from the Muslim community. Third, the non-Muslim society is also keen to savour the food offered, thus halal food business constantly attracts custom and is well received.

A motivating factor for them is that on embracing Islam, they find that Islam always encourages improvement. Thus, they are motivated to be innovative to the extent that some of them become even better than the original Muslims themselves. They try to conduct their business according to Islamic ethics as commanded by the Prophet p.b.u.h (Seng, 2011).

Politics:

In view of the Chinese Muslim community having only a single association, MACMA, which is an NGO, and they do not participate communally as a political body, generally they are not directly politically involved. In contrast to the Indian Muslim community which has a variety of welfare organisations such as PERMIM (Federation of Malaysian Indian Muslim Associations), PRESMA (Association of Muslim Restaurant Operators Malaysia) representing Indian Muslim restaurant operators in Malaysia and KIMMA (Malaysian Indian Muslim Congress) which represents them politically. However, individually, there are some Chinese Muslims who are politically active such as Anuar Tan and Khalil Idham Lim who are respectively state assemblymen for Kota Lama constituency, Kelantan and Titi Serong constituency, Perak. They are also representatives of political party Persatuan Islam se-Malaysia (PAS).

Social:

MACMA is the NGO which organizes social activities for Chinese Muslims, particularly in the field of dakwah. The purpose of forming this association is to represent the Chinese Muslim community. This association also plays a role as a Muslim NGO, particularly in dealing with problems faced by the Chinese Muslim community in Malaysia. Among the objectives of MACMA is the provision of Islamic knowledge and Islamic teachings to guide the community, conducting and coordinating dakwah activities, building a Malaysian Chinese Muslim Ummah (community), strengthening the brotherhood of Muslims, conducting studies, research, seminars and training to increase Islamic knowledge especially to MACMA members, building and administering Islamic economic activities, funds and charity donations to meet the requirements of welfare and social activities (MACMA, 2011).

MACMA has its own mission to promote the association and its members to the public. In addition, it tries to make a difference by educating the society. Internally, MACMA endeavours to contribute both physically and spiritually while acting as a communication link with the non-Muslim Chinese community. In term of membership, MACMA generally focuses on Chinese Muslims, while opening its membership to non-Chinese. Furthermore, it encourages and invites new converts, both Chinese and non-Chinese. Thus, there are two types of membership, ordinary and associate as well as life membership (Awang, 2005).
Aside from preaching, MACMA also conducts activities such as giving assistance to Chinese Muslims, whether in the form of advisory services or material things, provision of Islamic classes, holding discussions with MACMA members and publishing MACMA bulletin including articles and news of development of activities conducted. Classes are conducted for Chinese Muslims to increase their understanding of Islam and are held at certain places such as the MACMA headquarters, International Islamic University of Malaysia, Sri Kembangan and so on. Among the subjects taught are Understanding of Islam, al-Quran and Hadith, Arabic language, Aqidah, Tauhid and Fardhu Ain and these classes are conducted in Malay and Mandarin languages.

There are some prominent Chinese Muslims involved in dakwah activities, among them is Haji Ibrahim Tien Ying Ma. He was the Chinese consulate to Malaysia. After independence in 1957, he became active in The Islamic Welfare Organisation of Malaysia (PERKIM) together with Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard and Tan Sri Ubaidullah. He has written and published many books on Islam, among them are ‘The Light of Islam’, ‘Questions and Answers on Islam’, Why Muslims Don’t Eat Pork’, ‘The Teachings of Islam and Traditional Chinese Philosophy’ and ‘What is Islam?’ (Ma, 2003). Other than him, there are also other individuals such as Ridhuan Tee, Muhammad Fuad Yeoh, Ann Wan Seng, Hussain Yee and so on. Besides holding a job, they are active in giving talks through the mass media such as television programs, radio, magazines, newspapers and so on.

At the same time they also emphasize on preserving their Chinese identity, thus some activities such as forums or religious lectures are conducted in Mandarin. This indirectly strengthens the Chinese characteristics of MACMA members (Awang, 2005). Another activity is having diplomatic relations with the Muslim community in China, cultivating Chinese traditional practices, building of mosques in Chinese style architecture such as the Silver Jubilee Sultan Ismail Petra Mosque in Rantau Panjang, Kelantan and another in Negeri Sembilan. Two more mosques are still in the planning stage to be built at Jalan Davis, Kuala Lumpur at a cost of RM100,000,000 and still another to be built in Ipoh, Perak. These mosques will be complemented with an Islamic complex for the purpose of conducting activities, particularly dakwah (Berita Harian, 2011).

Some examples of Chinese Muslims and Their Occupations in Klang Valley:

Besides involvement in business, the development of this community is also influenced by the New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced by the Malaysian government. Among its effects is the increase in the middle class holding careers as professionals, managers and administrators. However, it is difficult to estimate the number of middle class from this community because no specific census is done on them. Among those well-known to the public are Datuk Haji Mustapha Ma, Ridhuan Tee, Ann Wan Seng, Fuad Yeoh Abdullah and so on. Datuk Hj. Mustapha Ma himself is the President of the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA), Ridhuan Tee, an independent preacher and associate professor in National Defence University of Malaysia, Ann Wan Seng, secretary-general of MACMA and Fuad Yeoh an engineer.

Conclusion:

The historical diaspora of this community which migrated to many countries shows their existence to this very day in Malaysia. Since hundreds of years ago they had built their settlements in Terengganu, Penang Island and Sabah. Besides that, the increase in the number of conversions to Islam by non-Muslim Chinese has made the Chinese Muslim community increasingly complex. Likewise, assimilation with the Malay Muslim majority makes preservation of their identity difficult. Today, they can be found and recognised through the developing industry of halal Chinese food restaurants in the Klang Valley. Besides that, MACMA plays an active role in organising social activities such as dakwah and welfare activities as in giving assistance to those in need especially Chinese Muslims, open house for Chinese New Year and so on. In the political aspect, however, they are generally not actively involved except for a few individuals.

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