More Islamic, no less Chinese: explorations into overseas Chinese Muslim identities in Malaysia

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This paper explores the newly emerging overseas Chinese-Muslim community in Malaysia. As China’s interactions with the Muslim-majority countries deepen, there will be more Chinese Muslims staying in these countries. Questions can be asked how connection with, and exposure to, the wider Islamic world influence their identity as Chinese Muslims. Through examining the activities of the Overseas Chinese Islamic Association, elite interviews and survey data of the Chinese Muslim students in Malaysia, this paper argues that in general overseas Chinese Muslims remain comfortable with their identity as both Muslim and Chinese. Some contributing factors include the presence of a sizable ethnic Chinese minority in Malaysia and the ease of modern communications technology. They also utilize their different identity categories to maximize advantages to the community. Also, the Chinese Muslims’ relations with official China and the Han majority are largely reproduced in Malaysia.

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As China embarks on its ambitious strategy of ‘One Belt One Road’ (the Silk Road Economic Belt and the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road), it is likely that China’s interaction with the Muslim world will intensify, as many countries along the ‘Belt’ and the ‘Road’ are Muslim-majority countries. Muslims in China therefore will become the potential facilitators and bridge builders for the Chinese state in this geopolitical and geoeconomic task. As Ho (2013) perpectively argues, there is an increased strategic importance of the Muslim minorities to the Chinese state, and the state is keen to mobilize them in its dealings with Muslim-majority countries. The Chinese Muslim minority groups in the process also increase their leverage and advantages vis-à-vis the state. Increasingly also, more and more Muslims from China will become students, workers, professionals, businesspersons in these Muslim-majority countries. Even before the ‘Belt and Road’, overseas Chinese Muslims were common in countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, and others. These traditional conceptions of Chinese Muslim identity have not been clarified first. First, this paper focuses on the Malaysian experience of overseas Chinese Muslims set up for the Chinese Muslim Association in Malaysia, the Chinese Muslim ethnic group, members of this organization, the Uighurs also reside in Malaysia, and cannot be easily generalized to the Uighur Muslims.

Finally, ‘identity’ here means membership in a larger category one identifies with, or objectively belongs to. These categories can be based on religion, race, class, ethnicity, and not just one group identity, or in fact, always circumstances or factors can adjust, elevate, or abandon. This paper is divided into an analysis of this transnational catches government and activities of the Overseas Chinese Muslim community in Malaysia, and the influential members of the...