


# Maintaining faith from within: How Chinese Muslim organisations in Indonesia improve converts' understanding of Islam

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This study discusses the numerous challenges that Chinese Muslims experience as a minority in Indonesia, as well as the role of Chinese Muslim groups in providing them with religious direction. This study employs a phenomenological approach that relies on in-depth interviews with 14 informants who were chosen purposively. According to the study, the obstacles faced are domestic constraints, where they are alienated by their extended family, and social constraints, particularly for those from disadvantaged groups. As a result of this situation, they became acquainted with several Chinese Muslim organisations. Although this phenomena demonstrates a constructive cooperation among Chinese Muslims, it also implies that assimilation efforts with local Muslims are not properly manifested.

**Contribution:** Although the decision to convert to Islam has resulted in exclusion from their extended family, they are still able to maintain their new faith by relying on Islamic organisations run by fellow Chinese Muslims. At the same time, this phenomenon illustrates that their assimilation efforts with local Muslims have not been properly realised.

**Keywords:** Chinese Muslims; Chinese identity; Chinese converts; da'wah; Chinese Muslim organisations.

## Introduction

According to historical evidence and scientific investigations, the Chinese had settled in the Indonesian archipelago even before the advent of the Europeans (Tan 2008). This is supported by the presumption that the Chinese were among the carriers of Islamic teachings to the archipelago, as evidenced by the presence of Admiral Cheng Ho's fleet in 1405 on his voyage to several regions in the archipelago, although the main message of Admiral Cheng Ho's arrival was not in the context of spreading Islam. As a result, it is not surprising that the existence of Chinese Muslims at the early stage of the development of Islam in Indonesia, particularly in the Java region, is evidenced not only by Chinese sources, local texts and oral traditions established in Java but also by various ancient Islamic relics in Java. All of this historical evidence implies that Muslims of Chinese descent have coexisted as natives with the local people.

During the colonial period, however, the image of the Chinese ethnicity degraded due to various stereotypes created by the Dutch and then transferred on to the Javanese people. This stereotype arose as a result of the Dutch observing a peaceful relationship between the Javanese and the Chinese on economic, social and political levels. This made the Dutch feel competitive, particularly in the financial sector, which culminated in the slaughter of the Chinese ethnic groups known as the Chinese massacre in October 1740 (Wijayakusuma 2005). As a result of the tragedy, the anti-Chinese movement picked up steam, and other terrible occurrences happened (Wijayakusuma 2005).

Furthermore, following this occurrence, the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, Dutch East India Company) enacted a regulation requiring all Chinese citizens to obtain a special travel authorisation when they travelled outside of the country. Furthermore, the VOC prohibited them from living in the city centre and ordered them to dwell in specific areas that were designed to be easier to control. This was one of the first manifestations of anti-Chinese racial politics in Java, resulting in the formation of in-groups and out-groups in society (Wijayakusuma 2005). This categorisation was then used to create a socio-political-economic divide between the Chinese and the locals, effectively making the Chinese a minority population.

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The meaning of minority in this context refers to their smaller number than some other ethnic groups in Indonesia. In Bandung, where this research was conducted, from 1930 to 1960, the Chinese made up only about 10% of the population at that time (Wijayakusuma 2005). As they were a minority, it is not surprising that they tended to struggle and develop certain strategies to survive. In Bandung, the Chinese initially settled in the Banceuy area. As their numbers grew, then a place was provided in the western part of the city (now called Pasar Baru) which was later called the Pecinan (Chinatown) area, so that their former settlement area in Banceuy was called the Pecinan Lama (Old Chinatown).

As may be observed today, the majority of Chinese in Indonesia live in cities. In these places, including Bandung, Chinese villages are typically a row of residences facing each other along a shopping strip. In addition, there are Chinese traders known as grocery traders in Bandung, who typically trade finished goods by travelling not just throughout the city, but also to remote villages (Tan 1979:45).

The withdrawal of the Dutch from Indonesia in 1950 created a vacancy in the dominance of the economy, which the Chinese soon filled, allowing them to increasingly dominate the economic sector. However, this did not last long, because the Indonesian government once again restricted their enterprise, particularly for those who were still foreign citizens, with the enactment of Regulation No. 10 of 1959, which allowed all Chinese foreign citizens (*Warga Negara Asing*, WNA) to only operate in the first- and second-level regional cities. The implementation of this rule affected the concentration of their economic area, which was centred in cities.

The Chinese's responsiveness to these changes made them better equipped to adjust to a changed social situation, not only politically with the government but also culturally. Not surprisingly, one analysis claims that embracing the indigenous majority's religion is one of their efforts to adapt to the context of Indonesia, which is mostly Muslim (Weng 2014). This is underlined by the fact that, despite having adopted Islam, they have not totally abandoned their ancestral practices and beliefs, allowing them to retain certain distinguishing characteristics.

As a strategy, this action does not always go well, because even though they have become Muslims, they still confront stereotypes in which they are perceived as an exclusive, materialistic and egoistic group, which in general still characterises the Chinese as a minority group. Their Muslim status makes them even more of a minority, not only for the Indonesian people in general but also for the Chinese themselves, which has consequences for their identity. On the one hand, they wish to keep their new faith as Muslims, but they still have strong ancestral traditions to maintain as Chinese.

On the other hand, they continue to believe that they are treated differently from indigenous Muslims, who appear to

be affected by colonialist stereotypes. They continue to feel ignored by their local Muslim brothers because they do not receive appropriate Islamic guidance from local religious individuals or institutions, although they have taken tremendous risks in deciding to convert to Islam. To expand their grasp of Islam, they end up relying on numerous religious organisations founded by fellow Chinese Muslims.

The purpose of this study is to find the answer to the following questions: what problems do Chinese people encounter while deciding to convert to Islam, and what are its consequences for their ethnic identity? What roles do Chinese religious figures and institutions play in guiding converts? These two foci will be based on the experiences of Chinese converts and several religious figures who have been controlling and strengthening their Islamic understanding.

## Literature review

In Indonesia, the Chinese are one of the ethnic minorities, accounting for around 2% – 3% of the population (Hoon 2006; Suryadinata 2003). Furthermore, the Chinese themselves are not homogeneous, but rather they comprise a variety of groupings that are sometimes misinterpreted as a homogeneous group by the government and the locals. In everyday life, however, this group is distinguished by *peranakan*, or those who speak Indonesian, and *totok*, or those who speak Mandarin, and some are also referred to as foreigners.

This view is a question of identity for the Chinese. Theoretically, the individual identity that appears in every social interaction is called social identity, which is part of the individual's self-concept that is formed because of the individual's awareness as a member of a social group, which includes the values and important emotions inherent in the individual as a member of a social group (Taylor & Moghaddam 1994). Furthermore, identity is frequently identified through social categories, which are the classification of people according to country, race, social class, occupation, gender, ethnicity, religion and other factors. This, in turn, leads to a social structure that is characteristic of society, namely a structure that determines the strength and status of relationships between individuals and groups.

For the Chinese, identity is constantly shaped by the community and individual relocation, migration and transculturation. Many diaspora residents are separate from those who live as 'indigenous', with a state-established identity and culture (Freedman 2001, 2003). As a result, Chinese in Indonesia have an identity created by their relationships in the category of *pribumi* (the locals) versus non-*pribumi*; 'citizen' (Indonesian citizen, WNI, literally means Indonesian citizen and is also used for ethnic Chinese who already have Indonesian citizenship) is confronted with 'non-citizen', or Indonesian-born with foreign descent or 'foreign descent' (Filomeno 2001). This category is strengthened by the idea that Chinese people are an exclusive

group. This is attributable to a variety of factors, including the fact that they have lived in Chinatown for decades. Many *totok* still speak Mandarin or Chinese dialects and maintain ancient Chinese traditions (Kuntjara & Hoon 2020).

This distinctiveness has compelled them to integrate and to close the gap between them and the majority of *pribumi*. In Indonesia, on the other hand, Chinese culture is quite diversified. It has a variety of self-identifications, which means that its assimilation process varies depending on internal elements like innate influences or personal experiences (Greif 1991:87). Indeed, disputes within the *peranakan* Chinese-Indonesian culture raged about integration versus assimilation in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Assimilation dominated *peranakan* politics throughout the New Order period, which was officially considered an endeavour to bolster the narrative of Chinese ethnic nationalism by eliminating barriers to assimilation and absorption or even other alternatives (Purdey 2003).

Thus, the problem of Chinese ethnic identity in Indonesia is linked to the complexities of political policies that assign them based on their political will. Because of the minority's fragile position, ethnic Chinese have frequently been trapped. Following the 30 September 1965 insurrection, called G30S/PKI, which included the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and destabilised Chinese ethnic status, the crisis of Chinese ethnic identity reached a climax (Bachrun & Hartanto 2000:39), even though many other experts have questioned the Chinese ethnic group's problem in the aftermath of the G30S/PKI disaster. Although many Chinese individuals were killed, no Chinese people were massacred in Indonesia between 1965 and 1966, because those who were killed were members of the PKI. However, like with Jews in Europe, this myth was perpetuated to defend the Chinese social position in Indonesia, and it was perpetuated because it motivated the urgency of battling Chinese discrimination in Indonesia, but it also resulted in the misunderstanding of the causes.

According to some research conducted since the May 1998 riots in Indonesia (see e.g. Soebagjo 2008; Suryadinata 1988, 2003), the search for Chinese ethnic identity in Indonesia is confronted with several options: become Indonesian, remain Chinese or adopt another identity. Suryadinata (1976, 1988) highlights the significance of integrating the Chinese minority into the economic, social, political and cultural systems of Indonesian society. President Soekarno proposed during the Old Order era that the Chinese were one of the tribes in Indonesia that were similar to other tribes and that they should become authentic Indonesians. Nonetheless, the G30S/PKI case foiled this strategy. The concept of assimilation was reinforced once more during the New Order period, and the Chinese ethnic group found itself in a dilemma.

However, following the Reformation period, the Chinese status was restored (Maulana 2010) through a revitalisation plan of Chinese practices and values. The political

environment shift has expanded ethnic Chinese participation in a variety of social sectors, both individually and collectively, especially among the smaller group of Chinese Muslims. Several initiatives have been undertaken to eliminate anti-Chinese stereotypes through various ethnic Chinese-based organisations. These acts, however, not only 'pay for themselves', but also return them to exclusivity (Giblin 2003).

This exclusivity stems partly from the fact that ethnic Chinese were historically a component of the Dutch political elite's middle class (along with Arabs, Indians, and others). Meanwhile, just a few indigenous people occupy traditional (feudal) elite positions, and the vast majority of *pribumi* are low-level producers of natural resources (Sahasrad 2019). This dichotomy is founded on three premises: (1) the belief that *pribumi* have no stake in the national economy; (2) as a result, government development policies must be geared toward increasing indigenous economies' participation; and (3) participation of community groups in the private (non-*pribumi*) economic sector would contribute to political stability (Siddique & Suryadinata 1981). The Dutch elite (local high officials such as the resident), the Chinese elite and the traditional elite (regent) constituted colonial society's institutions, which persisted into the Old and New Order periods (Sahasrad 2019).

As a result, it is unsurprising that Freedman (2003) regards Chinese identity in Indonesia as a political category for a long period, meaning that the Chinese community does not play a large role in politics. While politicians and other institutions in Indonesia attempted to compel Chinese ethnic groups to assimilate with the *pribumi* during the Suharto era, they frequently placed them in a contradictory position that made them an accessible target for racial violence. The May 1998 disaster is one example of how this assimilation programme failed. Following the Reformation, the country's slogan, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity), was enhanced by fostering cultural diversity management, particularly in current Indonesian Chinese ethnic identity politics (Hoon 2006).

Similar difficulties involving Chinese ethnic identity occur in Malaysia, where they are known as *bumiputera* (Malaysia) or *pribumi* (Indonesia). Simultaneously, the *bumiputera* make up the vast majority of Malays (Hirschman 1987). According to Jacobsen (2005), research on Chinese ethnicity in Southeast Asia typically demonstrates their commercial nature or level of assimilation to their country of residence, one of which is the majority religion of the country. Their assimilation in Indonesia and Malaysia is also tied to how Islam influences Chinese identity and awareness in their local communities.

In China, Muslim communities have existed in Canton from the 9th century or earlier, and Muslim traders played an essential part in numerous coastal regions of China during the 13th and 14th centuries, notably Canton and Quanzhou (Cushman & Gungwu 1988). They are also claimed to have interacted with Champa and Javanese people in the intervening time (Lombard & Salmon 2001). Chinese Muslims

have been migrating to Southeast Asia in response to China's political upheaval since the 9th century. Some of them had converted to Islam before arriving in the archipelago, but the majority of people did not until they became 'residents', as Islam was viewed as an intrinsic part of being 'local'. Following Indonesia's independence in 1945, they and their children, like the majority of Indonesians, decided to identify themselves by their place of residence.

During the Dutch colonial period in Indonesia, Muslim *peranakan* established a 'hybrid culture' by fusing local, Arabic or Islamic and Chinese elements. They constructed mosques in their architectural style. This may be seen in several historic mosques in Jepara and Maluku that feature round doorways, such as the Suzhou Garden. Other mosques have Cantonese-style pulpits. Meanwhile, in Banten, the Chinatown Mosque combines European and Chinese-style tower ornamentation. Similarly, the Masjid Jami Angke in Jakarta includes Chinese embellishments on the entry, a place to hang the drum and many other aspects of Chinese architecture (Budiman 1979).

Because Islam is the majority religion in Indonesia, being Muslim is part of the Chinese endeavour to 'be local'. In the Indonesian context, these efforts are aimed not only at ensuring socio-political stability but also at developing communities through the adoption of local cultures and intensive coordination with faith-based organisations, including Muslim mass organisations and nongovernmental organisations. They think that this cultural approach protects them against potential anti-Chinese sentiments and prejudice, as well as exploitation from the local population or the governmental bureaucracy (Muzakki 2010). They later formed the Chinese Muslim community through a variety of methods, media and initiatives (Mahfud 2018).

Several studies have shown that Chinese identity in Indonesia has altered through time as a result of shifting political policies. This culminated in the Chinese identity, which has traditionally struggled to integrate into Indonesian society. The issue of Chinese ethnicity rises as they choose to become Muslims, who are said to have a cultural tendency that differs from their ancestral culture, causing them to gradually enhance their role as minorities within the framework of Indonesian society and culture. They are confronted with interrelated issues involving politics, culture and religion, all of which shape their identity in their daily interactions.

In terms of religion, the majority of Chinese people follow Buddhism, Tridharma and Confucianism. Many, though, are Catholic or Christian. The number of ethnic Chinese who have converted to Islam has recently increased. This study attempts to describe specifically the various types of obstacles faced by the Chinese who then decided to convert to Islam and the impact on their identity as Chinese, as well as the role of religious figures and institutions among the Chinese in providing training for converts, in this complex struggle of identity.

## Method

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this study is to highlight some of the challenges that the Chinese faced after converting to Islam. This research investigated the experiences of converts and the officials of numerous organisations that provide religious guidance to converts, using the phenomenological method. In-depth interviews were conducted to gather the data. This study included 14 informants, including 10 converts and four officials from the religious development organisation for converts. These organisations are Yayasan Haji Karim Oei (YHKO), Mualaf Network (MNW), Lembaga Bina Mualaf Indonesia (Indonesian Mualaf Guidance Institute), and Al-Mantiq Foundation. Meanwhile, the questions were related to the experiences of the converts in obtaining support from these organisations in order to maintain their faith.

In addition to interviews, data were collected through participant observation while participating in various religious development activities sponsored by each organisation. To expand the knowledge and comprehension of Islam, observations were performed to acquire information about the thoughts and everyday lives of Chinese converts, as well as the activities they were involved in. A documentation study, in which the author examined diverse written sources to strengthen the assumptions and research findings, supplemented the results of observations and interviews.

All of the collected data were then triangulated and examined. The theoretical triangulation step was completed by re-examining some theoretical assumptions connected to the research objectives, notably those relating to the issues encountered by Chinese converts. Meanwhile, source triangulation was carried out by implementing the verification step of preliminary conclusions by re-confirming the information provided by all informants who participated in this study. Following this stage, the data and information were presented in the form of conclusions.

## Results and discussion

When someone decides to convert their faith, it is not an easy decision. Although religion is an individual matter, it has social implications and consequences. Similarly, if a Chinese person wishes to convert to Islam, they will face a variety of risks. In addition to having to explain themselves to their extended family, they are confronted with behavioural adjustments that must be accommodated, specifically conforming to Islamic principles.

Berger and Luckmann (1966:176) refer to these phenomena of a person's belief change as an alternation, which is a near-perfect radical metamorphosis. This process is distinguished not only by a shift in conduct but also, more crucially, by a shift in worldview. They alter their appearance, how they dress, how they conduct themselves, how they interact and other behaviours, all of which have an impact on their identity. This section highlights the difficulties encountered



by Chinese converts, as well as the assistance provided by Chinese Muslim organisations to promote Islamic awareness among them.

## Becoming a convert: Feeling happy even when exiled

Converting to Islam is one of the most important decisions a non-Muslim makes in their life. This may be the most challenging option for the Chinese because it entails betting and proving to their extended family that their decision was not a mistake. The decision to alter beliefs is also a matter of life and death, because it affects not only their fate in this world but also their fate in the afterlife. As a result, they are typically zealous in their pursuit of understanding and practising Islam. For them, the decision to become a Muslim is solely motivated by faith. They feel more resilient in the face of numerous hazards they may face as a result of the decisions they make, and they even feel happier. This is according to one of the following informants:

'I am happy with my decision to become a Muslim because I will get salvation in this world and the hereafter ...' (Informant 7, male, 46 years old, businessman)

This religious spirit motivates converts to practise Islam's teachings as thoroughly as possible; in fact, they try to encourage their fellow converts to continue to improve their understanding and knowledge of Islam by becoming da'wah activists, or people who help spread Islam teachings without using pressure or coercion.

As a result of their experience and deliberation, becoming a convert entails accepting responsibility for their conclusions. As a result, they strive to take Islam's teachings seriously. However, the majority of these converts experience barriers to openly practising Islam, particularly from their extended family milieu. Changes in beliefs are frequently interpreted as disrespecting their forefathers' culture and traditions.

'I am pleased with my decision to become a Muslim, although I must admit that the majority of my extended family opposed it. They were concerned that I would abandon a Chinese tradition that had to be carried down from generation to generation. One of the consequences I received was that I was no longer allowed to participate in large extended family functions since I was perceived to be different ...' (Informant 14, male, 43 years old, businessman)

'After a year of converting to Islam, I just informed my family of my faith. I was concerned about their reaction because several other converts had previously shared their stories. When I said that, it became clear that my family did not approve of my decision. They are concerned that I will be unhappy, because according to them, Muslims are often poor ...' (Informant 9, male, 38 years old, businessman)

Two key points are raised by the two informants mentioned above. Firstly, converts perceive a loss of their rights to participate in major family functions, particularly those associated with traditional events. Secondly, this rejection is exacerbated by Chinese views of Muslims as synonymous

with poverty. This widely held belief has forced converts to conceal their desire to accept Islam. Through her narrative, a female informant described the challenges she experienced in performing the five daily prayers at home because she had to conceal her identity when she first converted to Islam:

'When I decided to convert to Islam, I was required to wear the hijab and do the daily prayers while wearing a *mukena* [Indonesian word for a type of female clothing for prayer], just like other Muslim women. I can still get around it by not wearing a hijab at home because all of my family members are unaware that I am a convert, but it is tough for me to pray because I have to wear a *mukena* ...' (Informant 11, female, 32 years old, employee)

Some of these challenges are shared by mostly Chinese converts, who encounter various challenges. In addition to having to acquire their new beliefs, they are also confronted with a family environment that does not provide support, putting them under a great deal of stress. Another issue is their interactions with fellow native Muslims, who, according to them, are less concerned about their fate after becoming converts, although they face several physical and emotional challenges.

It should be noted that not all Chinese converts to Islam come from well-established households; some come from lower-middle-class families. This is a separate barrier for those from the lower middle class because some of them are then embargoed by their extended families who have been assisting them with their economic endeavors. This cannot even be resolved by relaying their issues to other local Muslims, because they are perceived as incapable of providing real remedies. Even some of these converts are embarrassed and even discouraged from disclosing their financial concerns. This is according to one of the following informants:

'I'm discouraged about staying in touch with fellow Muslim brothers because there hasn't been a nice response. In truth, I only meant to ask for assistance with "business opportunities", not money.' (Informant 8, male, 41 years old, businessman)

This was confirmed by a Chinese Muslim figure who was also a study informant. Their narrative is as follows:

'Yes, there are such things, but they are incidental, meaning that not all indigenous Muslims are unconcerned about us because they provide some aid for the maintenance of religious activities. Nonetheless, this is a cause for concern, and religious groups must find a solution for converts who are having financial difficulties. At the very least, it is vital to state that certain Muslim-owned organisations deal with converts' concerns.' (Informant 1, female, 39 years old, social worker)

Based on the experiences of some of the above informants, it can be concluded that the challenges they confront can be divided into two categories. Firstly, there are domestic constraints, such as the various risks and problems they face in the family environment, where they eventually practise Islamic teachings in secret, and if it is discovered, they will be shunned by their extended family because they are considered to be against ancestral traditions. Secondly, there are societal limits, such as

additional social problems, particularly if they originate among the poor. They are experiencing economic hardships as a result of the economic 'embargoes', and they are hesitant to share their troubles with local Muslims.

This second fact appears to show that being a Muslim as part of assimilation efforts to become 'local' has failed, because they are still dealing with preconceptions about indigenous Muslims (Muzakki 2010; Weng 2014). However, as indicated in the preceding section, their decision to embrace Islam is not only motivated by a desire to be more local but also by a belief in the religion. As a result, their efforts to develop relations with fellow Chinese Muslims as a means of overcoming numerous obstacles demonstrate that there is an unsolved integration issue.

## Studying Islam and strengthening independence: The role of Chinese Islamic organisations

The divide between Chinese converts and local Muslims persists because the converts believe that local Muslims abandoned them after they converted to Islam. In other words, local Muslim leaders' da'wah efforts end once they become Muslims, even if they still require guidance and deepening of Islamic understanding. Converting does not guarantee that they would have the same access to instruction from indigenous Muslim religious authorities. At least, this is what the confessions of the following informants indicate:

'With indigenous Muslims, there is sometimes disappointment. They struggled at first to persuade us to become Muslims, but after that, they refused to teach us Islam, although we still require Islamic knowledge to be more complete ...' (Informant 1, female, 39 years old, social worker)

'One of the challenges I confront is keeping my faith. With the different pressures and issues that I experience, I need reinforcement, which I believe should be provided by the ustads who used to invite me to become a Muslim, but they appear to be concentrating on other matters ... I understand this, yet there are moments when I feel as if they are ignoring me ...' (Informant 3, male, 46 years old, businessman)

Chinese Muslim organisations are attempting to accommodate the Islamic activities of these converts based on the numerous grievances of these converts. They conduct recitations through these organisations, among other things, to retain their consistency in caring for their beliefs, which are deemed vulnerable owing to the different issues they encounter. Apart from being institutionalised, certain individuals provide coaching as a result of their status as Chinese Muslim personalities. In addition to these objectives, the group seeks to provide assistance and consultation, as well as to provide greater insight into Islam and promote self-confidence and a strong sense of brotherhood among Muslims, particularly ethnic Chinese converts.

These organisations are: YHKO, MNW, Lembaga Bina Muallaf Indonesia (Indonesian Muallaf Guidance Institute),

and Al-Mantiq Foundation. There are several other organisations, but for research purposes, the focus in this study is only on the aforementioned organisations.

### Yayasan Haji Karim Oei

This organisation was established in 1991 by a group of Islamic figures from various religious mass organisations in Indonesia, including Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, Al-Wasliyah and other organisations including ICMI, KAHMI and other Muslims of Chinese heritage. This foundation was formerly known as the Haji Abdul Karim Oei Tjeng Hien Foundation, but it was eventually abbreviated to YHKO Foundation.

According to the officials of this foundation, one of the main reasons for establishing the YHKO was to equalise Christian missionary activities. This is reflected in the foundation's objective, which is to teach Islam to Chinese people because the Chinese are a minority with much potential who need a way to integrate with the indigenous people. The name 'Oei' is derived from Karim Oei (1905–1988), who converted to Islam in the 1930s. He was a personal friend of President Soekarno and the famed Indonesian preacher Buya Hamka, and he was regarded as a genuine nationalist, freedom fighter and devoted Muslim. He is also a Muhammadiyah figure and a da'wah pioneer among ethnic Chinese.

The establishment of the Islamic Information Centre for Chinese, located in Pasar Baru, Jakarta, is one of the movements carried out by YHKO. Because it is also a mosque known as the Lautze Mosque, this location is also the hub of Chinese Muslim religious activities. As a centre of activity, this location hosts Eid prayers, Eid al-Adha prayers and regular recitations. Every Sunday, there is an open house where converts and other Muslims can keep in touch. They can share their stories and participate in recitations and other activities targeted solely at enhancing the religion and brotherhood among other Muslims.

The adoption of the name 'Oei' for this location proved to be highly interesting and effective, particularly for the Chinese. Even this location is open to the general public for them to learn more about Islam and Chinese culture at the same time. They can use this space, especially for converts, to study Islam together. In this place, they learn the fundamentals of Islam, such as how to pray and memorise short verses of the Qur'an.

In general, YHKO gives Islamic information to converts of all ages every weekday. During Ramadhan, YHKO hosts an *iftar* activity every Sunday and conducts *tarawih* prayer for the believers. Furthermore, YHKO supports the collection of *zakat fitrah* and sacrificial animals to be delivered to the people residing near the mosque, as well as the holding of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha prayers. This foundation now has branches in Surabaya, Bandung, Cirebon, Cilacap, Yogyakarta and Tangerang. The Lautze II and Lautze III mosques in Bandung and Cirebon are even managed by YHKO.

## Muallaf network

This organisation is another group whose goal is to improve the understanding of Chinese Muslims who have converted to Islam. This organisation was established on 28 November 2004, and it is located at Jalan Tamlong in Bandung, Indonesia. The YHKO, Bandung Branch, runs this organisation as one of its social divisions. As a result, this organisation has a hierarchical relationship with YHKO, and it can be claimed that MNW is a new name for YHKO's Bandung Branch in coaching the converts.

Currently, MNW encourages converts through an integrated coaching model that includes spirituality, science, worship practices, personal therapy, togetherness forums, business and economics. The main goal of MNW development is to help converts become self-sufficient Muslims in terms of religion, science, social and economic matters. The MNW also oversees areas of activities like training and Islamic studies, as well as the publication of the MNW's special bulletins. This activity interacts with various radio stations in Bandung for publication, as well as administering websites, wall magazines and other publications. The Muallaf Network also provides free compensation to converts in need or those in the local community who deserve it as part of its social initiatives.

According to one official of MNW, currently, there are around 50 registered members of MNW. However, it is only 10 active members who directly participate in the programmes organised by MNW. This is due to the busyness of the converts, who are mostly entrepreneurs. In this case, the MNW management admits that their busyness is one of the common obstacles in the process of religious development. This is as expressed as follows:

'In reality, the *pengajian* are intended not just to increase religious knowledge but also to strengthen one another so that their convictions do not sway. However, we recognise that the ideal partnership is not always realised because most of them have other commitments ...' (Informant 2, male, 45 years old, MNW board member)

To overcome this, MNW officials took proactive measures by personally contacting these registered converts. This is done to nurture them so that their faith does not waver, and it is hoped that the nourished converts would become one of the links in the chain of the Islamic revival's emergence and will be able to participate in society in their daily lives.

## Lembaga Bina Mualaf Indonesia

It is not easy to change one's beliefs. Usually, a convert to Islam pledges his or her Islam in front of someone in a mosque or other place and receives a certificate from a particular mosque or imam. However, this event does not only involve the person concerned, but is also sometimes attended by the family of the convert. This process, however, is only the beginning, as they will soon be confronted with a variety of personal and social challenges. Many people do

not comprehend the needs of converts, although they require friends, refuge and mentors who can help them not only learn more about Islam but also provide moral support and security.

Lembaga Bina Mualaf Indonesia was created on this basis, with the intention that it would be able to carry out similar da'wah activities to converts to Islam as YHKO and others. As the name suggests, this institution concentrates on the da'wah movement among Chinese converts, that is, offering a greater grasp of religion as well as moral assistance in the light of the different issues they confront.

Routine *pengajian* and counselling services are among the activities organised by Lembaga Bina Mualaf Indonesia. Regular recitations attempt to improve Chinese converts' understanding and knowledge of Islam, while counselling services are provided to converts who face difficulties and require moral support in dealing with them. This organisation's participation is a show of concern for fellow Chinese Muslims.

## Al-Mantiq Foundation

It began in 1994 with a family recitation at the residence of Sugiri, one of the former British diplomats. As a convert at the time, he joined the study, which was then joined by numerous more converts. He revealed the challenges of converts during the recitation forum. Their criticisms were met with a good response from other members of the recitation, and they eventually agreed to form an organisation named Al-Mantiq Foundation.

The reason for choosing the name 'Al-Mantiq' is connected to the meaning of the word itself, which means logic, so it is impressive that the reason they became converts to Islam was a logical-rational act, not because they were part of it or merely heredity. This group is centred in the Namira Mosque in South Jakarta. This organisation's main function is to provide counselling to converts, who frequently confront difficulties while deciding to change their views, and to provide supplies to converts so that they can live more independently.

As the name suggests, the majority of this organisation's members are intellectuals, including students, scholars, academics and professionals in various professions. This makes it simpler for them to carry out their activities by collaborating with large organisations such as Dompot Dhuafa Republika and Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII). Coaching activities are carried out through recitations given once a month. Individual coaching is also provided, particularly for converts who want to improve their ability to read and understand the Qur'an with a certain method.

For self-reliance development activities, this organisation tries to provide scholarships to converts, because in general, individuals who are still in their productive age and expelled from their families for converting to Islam still require aid to

attain their goals. This is explained by the informant as follows:

'This organisation also protects converts who have been persecuted for changing their religion. Scholarships are also available for disadvantaged young converts of school age. For example, we provided a computer course scholarship to a Muslim convert whose family had kicked him out. We hunt for these scholarship monies on our own and occasionally use funds raised voluntarily by other members ...' (Informant 4, male, 49 years old, Al-Mantiq Foundation board member)

According to this informant, helping converts to become self-reliant is primarily an effort to offer them protection, because they are usually expelled from their families. With the assistance being provided, these individuals will be able to live a better life, thereby demonstrating to their families that their decision to change their faith was not a mistake.

Thus, the existence of these organisations has two main objectives, namely strengthening Islamic beliefs and knowledge among converts, and providing material and moral assistance to converts to enable them to live independently. These two examples show that, despite its casuistic nature, assimilation of Chinese Muslims and indigenous Muslims has not been completely realised. However, converts' preference for a coaching organisation founded by their peers demonstrates that ethnic ties continue to be more powerful than ones founded on identical ideas. This could be due to stereotypes in each group, or it could be a sensible choice they make.

## Conclusion

Being a convert is not easy, especially when the individuals are minority with a lengthy and difficult historical background, as is the case in Indonesia. This is worsened further by misconceptions that frequently originate from both the indigenous population and the Chinese ethnic group. However, Chinese converts to Islam often make reasonable and belief-based judgments, which give them confidence in their decisions even when they encounter significant difficulties from their extended family.

According to the findings of the study, the challenges faced by Chinese converts can be divided into two categories: domestic and social constraints. Domestic constraints are related to the problems they confront in a large family context; they must practise Islam in secret; if discovered, they will be shunned by their extended family because it is considered antithetical to ancestral traditions. Meanwhile, societal constraints are linked to additional issues, particularly those problems faced by the poor converts because of their low economic status. When they decide to become Muslims, their extended family usually imposes an economic 'embargo' as a form of rejection. This familial response leaves them with more complicated problems. Furthermore, they are hesitant to communicate their issues to their fellow native Muslims because of prejudices in both groups, implying that their decision to join Islam to become local should be reconsidered.

The relatively less harmonious relationship between Chinese converts and indigenous Muslims is also exemplified by their preference for Islamic development groups headed by fellow Chinese Muslims. Even though it is merely a specific circumstance, some of these organisations, such as the YHKO, the MNW, the Lembaga Bina Mualaf Indonesia and Yayasan Al-Mantiq, are in the scenario to provide intensive instruction on Islamic knowledge in the framework of this study. They exist to achieve two major goals: to strengthen Islamic beliefs and knowledge among converts and to provide material and moral help to converts for them to be able to live independently. On the other hand, this situation demonstrates that assimilation between Chinese and indigenous Muslims in Indonesia has not been fully achieved.

## Recommendation

This study describes the experiences of Chinese converts in the city of Bandung and their relation to the efforts of Chinese Muslim organisations to play a role in maintaining the converts' beliefs. Therefore, other studies are needed to explore similar phenomena in other Indonesian regions, which may show a different picture, in order to enrich facts and phenomena as the broader context in Indonesia.

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### Author's contributions

Y.Z.A. the sole author of this research article.

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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