
*Chinese Ways of Being Muslim* demonstrates how Chinese Muslims identities in Indonesia are performed through contingencies of social, political and cultural contexts. Using rich ethnographic data collected in several sites across Indonesia over a period of thirteen months from 2008 to 2009, the book makes a compelling argument that the marriage between Chineseness and Islamic identity is no zero sum game. As the author repeatedly emphasizes, “one can be ‘more Islamic, but no less Chinese’, as well as ‘more Chinese, but no less Indonesian’” (270). This significant study convincingly shows how the emergence of a variety of Chinese Muslim cultural identities has pluralized the discourses of Chineseness and Islam in Indonesia.

*Chinese Ways of Being Muslim* is one of the most comprehensive and theoretically sophisticated book on the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia. The book is conceptually innovative: it traverses religious, ethnic, national and disciplinary boundaries in challenging dichotomies such as ethnicity vs. religiosity, cosmopolitanism vs. local forces, identity vs. hybridity, and authenticity vs. flexibility. By examining the intersections of these categories, the book portrays Chinese Muslim identity as plural, complex and paradoxical: for instance, while Chinese Muslim identity might suggest some kind of inclusive, hybrid and fluid qualities, they can also be reified as exclusive, essentialist and bounded. Many converts adapt their understandings and practices of Islam according to their own social realities, which often result in diverse manifestation of Islamic religiosity. The author describes this as “flexible piety.” He maintains that “there is not ‘a Chinese way of being Muslim,’ but multiple ways of being or not being Chinese and Muslim in Indonesia” (xi).

The book is logically organized into eight chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. The Introduction frames the study of Chinese Muslim identities in relevant social and theoretical contexts, paving the way for discussions of various aspects of constructions and negotiations of Chinese Muslim identities in the subsequent chapters. Chapters Two to Seven examine the ways in which Chinese Muslim identities are constructed by community organizations, influenced by political situations, represented in public media and negotiated in everyday life. The chapters specifically explore these six sites of identity contestation: historical memories, mosque architecture, preaching strategies, social participation, cultural celebration and religious practices.

Chapter Two presents a brief survey of Chinese Muslim identities in the archipelago at different historical junctures, signifying that they are part and parcel of Indonesian Islam, and they contribute to the on-going negotiations
of diverse Islamic traditions in the archipelago. Focusing on the politics of representation, the chapter critically examines the ways in which these historical memories are being remembered, selected and articulated by Chinese Muslims in contemporary Indonesia. In Chapter Three, the author shifted from the discussion of the temporal trajectory to that of the spatial formation of Chinese Muslim identities through an analysis of Chinese-style mosques. He argues that these hybrid ethno-religious mosques are meant to demonstrate their negotiation between transnational imaginations and local dynamics manifested in a unique Chinese Muslim identity: i.e. concomitantly being part of the Chinese diaspora as well as part of the Islamic Ummah. As local cosmopolitan sites, these mosques also function as inclusive spaces within which Muslims and non-Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds can socialize.

Chineseness became a much celebrated “ethno-commodity” after the fall of Suharto in 1998 (Sai and Hoon 2013). Chapter Four of the book discusses how “celebrity” Chinese Muslim preachers rode on this post-Suharto momentum to capitalize on Chinese cultural symbols in their preaching. By emphasizing the performance aspect of their preaching, the author cautions against simplistic reading of their public enactment of commodified Chineseness as a “true” expression of their everyday identity, or a progressive act of counter ethnic stereotypes, or even a genuine attempt to pluralize the substance of Islamic discourses in Indonesia. He maintains that these preachers “may sell Chineseness but they do not live Chineseness” (157). For many of them, Chineseness is merely a marketing tool that they strategically utilize to differentiate themselves from other non-Chinese Muslims preachers.

Chapter Five examines the diverse social and political involvement of Chinese Muslims in democratizing Indonesia. Through a critical review of the strategic solidarity and internal dynamics of Chinese Muslim organizations such as PITI and the Karim Oei Foundation, the author discusses the ways in which Chinese Muslims are clustered through contingency of social interests and political claims. Such interests vary from promoting assimilation into local Muslim community and Islamic proselytization to simply networking. The author observes that Chinese Muslim organizations are generally inclusive and tolerant of internal diversity, but affiliations to multiple social and political organizations are not uncommon among Chinese Muslims.

By means of a case study of Chinese New Year (Imlek) celebrations in mosques, Chapter Six examines how Chinese Muslims practice “cultural dakwah” or Islamic outreach through a cultural approach—a familiar method in the spread of Islam in Java. However, the celebration of Imlek met with