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Religious Conversion and Reconstruction of Identities: The Case of Chinese Muslim Converts in Malaysia

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RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES: THE CASE OF CHINESE MUSLIM CONVERTS IN MALAYSIA

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The issues addressed by this research are identity construction and religious conversion, with emphasis on the conflict between religious and ethnic identities as a result of conversion. Previous research on religious conversion has focused more on the outcome, or product, of situations, while it has failed to examine the process leading to that outcome. As I will demonstrate in this paper, this is also the case for studies on Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia (Chuah 2001; Ma 1996; Nagata 1978). While political and economic factors of conversion are highlighted and the level of acceptance and rejection by the Malay and Chinese communities has been discussed, religious conversion and identity construction, however, is a much more complex and diverse phenomenon. In order to have a better understanding about Chinese Muslim converts, it is necessary that we focus on the dynamics within the process as well. After all, personal transformation is a long-term process that is extended through time and is not simply an end product. Based on two-and-a-half months of fieldwork research in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, preliminary findings indicate that Chinese Muslim converts undergo different processes of reconstruction of identity in response to the challenges their identities face as a result of conversion.

This paper will highlight three major aspects which could show that this process of reconstructing an identity is highly complex and diverse. Firstly, converts' Muslim identity is constructed through the learning about Islam. They always play an active role in learning the doctrine of Islam, however, through different ways and thus have different consequences. Secondly, their Chinese identity must be negotiated after the process of conversion. In order to prove that they are not becoming Malay, they had made adjustment between their religion and ethnicity by participating in various Chinese cultural celebrations. Lastly, in between constructing a new identity and negotiating their Chinese identity, we can find that respondents have different attitudes towards adopting an Islamic name or maintaining their Chinese name.

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SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

At the heart of this study is the notion of identity: a highly complex concept which has been examined from a wide variety of perspectives within the social sciences. The social identity theory developed by Henri Tajfel and his colleagues provides the basis for a systematic investigation of the relationship between individual's self-definition and their perceptions of the social categories to which they and others around them belong. For Tajfel (1982: 2), social identity is

> part of the individual's self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.

According to this definition of social identity, the ethnic identity of any of my respondents is his or her knowledge, values and feelings in relation to membership of an ethnic minority in Malaysia that originates in China; the religious identity is, likewise, his or her knowledge, values and feelings relating to membership of the Muslim community in Malaysia and also the global Muslim *umma* (community of believers).

Religious conversion is defined as a 'shift across religious tradition' (Stark and Finke 2000). This shift across tradition is important because it is dramatic and generates a greater amount of conflict. According to Roberts (1990), religious conversion refers to a process of 'turning around' or changing direction in life, which refers to a change of world view specifically. While it often is viewed as a sudden crisis, the process can also be a gradual one. Yet in any case, conversion represents a transformation in a person's self image. The change is often 'symbolized by a change of name' (Roberts 1990: 102). Conversion implies not only the subjective embracing of an alternative set of beliefs, but is also likely to involve the transformation of personal practices – in diet, dress, social and cultural networks, time schedules or name. Such movement of religious affiliation usually is accompanied by substantial shifts in subjective identity, cognitive and affective orientation.

During the process of religious conversion, converts undergo a reproduction of identities. Berger (1967: 18) describes the conversion process as a conversation with significant others, through which the individual co-creates and actively appropriates his social world; 'The social world (with its appropriate institutions, roles and identities) is not passively absorbed by the individual, but actively appropriated by him'. The reality of the individual's world depends upon this conversation. Thus, to pass as a convert, the individual needs to know how to talk like a convert; how to behave like a convert; and how to look like a convert (Kilbourne and Richardson 1988). As the new identity of the convert is produced through this narrative and performance, it is important to also consider the convert's audience. They usually help to shape the convert's new identity and self through their part in the conversation and their responses to the convert's

performance as a convert. This is even more particular in the case of conversion to Islam, which serves not only as shifting of religious belief but also an adoption of a new ways of life. The five pillars of Islam serves as the foundation to Muslim life, guiding their spiritual beliefs; what they can eat (consumption of pork, alcohol and non-halal food is not allowed); and what they wear (men and women are required to wear proper attire according to the Qur'an).[2]

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-religion society composed of three major ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese and Indian. These ethnic categories, which were first constructed by the British colonial government, became a social norm, although each of these categories share a common flaw in the fact that they never representing a homogenous group of people but comprise of many other sub-ethnic groups (Tan 1982). For instance, the Chinese in Malaysia have never been a homogeneous group of people, they or their ancestors hail from various parts of China with different dialects and different customs. Tan (1997) provides an insightful investigation of the construction of ethnic identities among Chinese in Malaysia. He suggests that other than the difference of place of origin, the level of socialization and localization that the individual received also shape Malaysian Chinese ethnic and cultural identities. Ethnic identities for Chinese in Malaysia are 'a multi-level and multi-faceted concept' (Tan 1997). Chinese who received education in different languages (Chinese, English and Malay), speak different dialects, or are from different places in Malaysia (in relations to the level of localization) may be perceived as harboring different cultural identities. However, no matter how diverse it is within the group of Chinese in terms of language and custom, all the Chinese see themselves as belonging to one ethnic group vis-à-vis Malays and other Malaysians. Therefore ethnicity in Malaysia serves as a boundary to distinguish the 'self and the others' (Barth 1969).

Religion plays a major role as the boundary between Chinese and Malays. The Malaysian Constitution clearly lays down the ethnic boundary between the Malay and Chinese. As defined by the Constitution, Malay is 'a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay customs' and is a citizen of Malaysia (Malaysia 1993). While Malay language serves as the national language of Malaysia and all citizen of Malaysia are expected to learn it in school and Malay culture is a vibrant concept that is difficult to define, Islam becomes the most significant ethnic characteristic of the

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[2] Faith or belief in the Oneness of God and the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad by that 'there is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God', which is *Shahadah* and serve as the first of five pillars of Islam; The second pillar of Islam is the prayers required of Muslims five time daily; thirdly, Muslims are required almsgiving that is one of the five pillars of Islam. Muslims with financial means are required to give 2.5 percent of their net worth annually as zakah, which is used to help people in need; fourthly, in Islam fasting is required during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar, during which all Muslims are required to abstain during daylight hours from eating, drinking, or engaging in sexual activity; last but not the least, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca during the month of Dhu al-Hijjah. All adult Muslims are required to perform it at least once in their lives if they are physically and financially able. Pilgrims dress modestly and simply, proclaiming the equality and humility of all believers before God, regardless of worldly differences in race, nationality, class, age, gender, or culture (Esposito 2003).

Malay and the distinguishing boundary between Malay and Chinese. Thus, Chinese Muslim converts who had been seen as the group which try to cross the boundary are always need to face the dilemma of their ethnic and religious identity.

Converting to Islam is understood by both Chinese and Malay communities as *masuk Melayu*, or becoming Malay (Nagata 1978). Previous studies shows that in many cases, Chinese Muslims converts are rejected by the Chinese community because they are seen as a deserter to their traditional culture and 'superior' ethnic identity(Chuah 2001; Ma 1996) or by the Malay who distrust of the motives behind their conversion, sometimes interpreting their actions as an attempt to receive special economic benefits, demonstrating infidelity to the religion (Nagata 1978; Siow 1983); or even rejected by both (Long 1989; Tan 2000). In this situation, how do Chinese Muslim converts perceive their own identity? How do they respond to the change of religious identity because of conversion, and how does it affect the understanding/perception of their ethnic identity? These are the questions that are rarely investigated in detail by previous studies.

DATA, CONTEXT AND PROCEDURES

Chinese Muslims only comprise a small proportion – perhaps one percent – of Chinese population in Malaysia (Ma 2002; Tan 2000). According to previous studies, there are two groups of Chinese Muslims who can be found in Malaysia: Chinese Muslims from China and Chinese who convert to Islam. For example, Tan (1988) indicates that there are a group of Chinese Muslims from China in Terengganu who identify themselves as 'Hui hui' in order to distinguish themselves from local Malay Muslims and the Chinese Muslims converts (Tan 1988). The experience of conversion serves as a significant boundary between Chinese Muslims converts and Chinese Muslims from China, which also led to their different situation in the society. Conversion is not just an acceptance of beliefs but it is also an acceptance of a new identity. Compared with Chinese Muslims from China, Chinese Muslim converts who are new to the religion have to face more challenges.

Statistics on Chinese Muslim converts are limited. Muslim converts are required to register with the state's *Jabatan Agama Islam* [3]or JAKIM[4], depending on

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[3] *Jabatan Agama Islam*, or Department of Islamic Affairs and Administration, is responsible for Islamic affairs at the state level under the operation of the Sultan who has the highest power on religious affairs in his own state. *Jabatan Agama Islam* had been set up in all 13 states in Malaysia, including the Federal Territories (Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Labuan). Different from the others, the J*abatan Agama Islam Wilayah Perskutuan* (JAWI), or Department of Islamic Affairs and Administration of Federal Territories, is administrated by JAKIM (see following note) under the Prime Minister's Office.

[4] JAKIM, or *Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (Department of Islamic Advancement Malaysia), is a department under the operation of Prime Minister's Office. It serves as a co-ordinating body for different religious departments in different states. It also operates the *Jabatan Agama Islam* in Federal Territories, and has special divisions in Sabah and Sarawak (JAKIM Caw Sabah and JAKIM Caw Sarawak) which serves mainly the preaching of Islam in Eastern Malaysia.

where they live and converted, in order to obtain a legalized Muslim status. However, statistics on the exact number of new converts and their ethnicity are not open to the public. When I was conducting my fieldwork research in Malaysia, I had tried to contact officials from JAKIM about the statistics but was told that 'it is too sensitive' and was refused access; I assume the reason is that ethnic politics are always tense in Malaysia. Politicians may manipulate the data and attack the government on their religious policies, for example by saying people are being forced to convert to Islam. Unable to collect the first hand data, I have to rely on the secondary data from other scholars' work. According to Chuah (2001), the number of Muslim converts in Malaysia is steadily increasing from 541 in 1967 to 4,069 in 1990 and on average there are more than 3,600 people converting to Islam in Malaysia each year. According to the census in 2000, there are 57,221 Chinese Muslims, which is one percent of total Chinese population in Malaysia. Selangor is the state where most of the Chinese Muslims are concentrated (17,246), followed by Sabah (8,589), Kuala Lumpur (7,991) and Sarawak (7,287) (Ma 2002). However, the number of converts had not been indicated in these numbers.

Previous studies on Chinese Muslims converts show that they are typically marginalized. Nagata (1978) described:

> The Chinese Muslims in many cases are no longer regarded as full Chinese and jeopardize their bonds to the patrilineage. They become a social anomaly, and exist in an ethnic limbo. (Nagata 1978)

The reason for this marginalization, as discussed by many scholars, is that Chinese Muslim converts' motives for conversion are suspected by both Chinese and Malay communities. One of the stereotypes of Chinese Muslim converts is that their conversion is based on 'convenience and opportunism' (Long 1989). It is suspected that Chinese who converted to Islam was aiming to obtain certain benefits and were not sincere about the religion. Some conceived that they converted to Islam in order to marry a Malay and they would not really practice the religion. On the other hand, especially after the ethnic riot in 1969 and the implementation of New Economic Policy during 1970s, the significant difference between *bumiputra* and non-*bumiputra* status was understood as the major motive for conversion by both Malay and Chinese community. Special privilege such as higher quota rate for tertiary education and higher priority in applying job in government sector were given to the *bumiputra*. Also, the bumiputra-owned corporation had received special assistance from the government to flourish. Thus, there was a general conception that Chinese who convert to Islam aimed to obtain the bumiputra status thus enjoy the special privileges. Furthermore, some supposed that Chinese became Muslim in order to obtain the special government financial subsidy provided by the Islamic *Jabatan Agama Islam*.

However, with rapid economic growth during the 1980s and 1990s, economic status in Malaysia increased generally and the gap in economic status between

Chinese and Malay decreased. The lifting of affirmative action policies that privileged the *bumiputra* in business sector allowed fair competition between Malay and non-Malay in the commercial sphere. This may be seen to refute the assertion that Chinese Muslims convert in order to gain *bumiputra* status and the business opportunities associated with it. Furthermore, as mentioned by my respondents, converting to Islam does not mean that they can obtain the *bumiputra* status. For Chinese Muslim converts, the *bumiputra* status is neither obtainable institutionally nor socially. It is true that in the early 1960s, Chinese converts could completely change their names, their ethnic identification and the religion as it appeared on their identity card and other official documents. However, this was no longer the case from the 1980s. Institutionally, Chinese converts cannot change their official ethnic identification. There are also certain regulations in terms of changing one's name. Socially, although converting to Islam is understood by both Malay and Chinese community as *masuk Melayu*, or 'becoming Malay', it does not means that they are totally accepted as Malay but considered as *Saduara Baru*, or 'new brother and sisters/associates converted to Islam'.

For the Chinese community, Chinese who are converting to Islam implies that they are leaving their origin, betraying their tradition and mingling with the Malay more than with the Chinese. For the Malay community, Chinese can only be considered a convert if they adopt a Malay's ways of life.

However, Long (1989) argued that this issue is not really about how Islamic doctrine is not compatible with Chinese culture, but rather, the problem is that the Chinese identity and Muslim identity are 'socially codified'. She described this as a 'cultural cluster', which is a standard norm arising from the ethno-religious cluster that Islam is the religion associated with the Malay. This, she argues, is particularly the site of ethnic tension in the Malaysian context. Malays have their own way to understand Islam and this is why they understand conversion as *masuk Melayu*, judging converts based on 'Malay ways of life'.

With these stereotypes and misunderstandings of their motives of conversion, Chinese Muslims have to face a lot of challenges after their conversion. As suggested by Rosey Ma (1996), several major issues arise including: problems with family who are opposed to their conversion because of various reasons such as interethnic marriage, family's lack of understanding about the religion, or misleaded understanding about Islam; problems in the work place like significant change of attitude from Chinese colleagues; problems with Malay in-laws and friends who are suspicious about their motives of conversion and whether they fully practice the religion.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Given the historical tensions that have characterized ethnic relations in Malaysia, it is understandable that contested ethnic identity usually serves as the focus of studies of Chinese Muslim converts. In the existing literature about Chinese Muslim convert community, it is found that the focii are usually as follows:

whether converts can be accepted by Malay community; how well they were accepted by Malay and how they were rejected by Chinese community. However, this should not be the only aspect of study. Focusing on one aspect not only could not provide us a better picture to understand the Chinese Muslim converts; it is also, in a way, reinforcing certain stereotypes of converts.

Further, it is found that most of the recent studies on Chinese Muslim converts adopted a quantitative method (Ma 1996; Chuah 2001). These studies provide a comprehensive understanding of Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia and useful bibliographical background about them. However, researchers tend to use more 'outward' perspectives to see how well Chinese Muslims are being accepted in Malay communities and how they are being rejected by their family and Chinese community. Studies are usually focused on ethnic boundary maintenance and the notion of assimilation, by listing out the reasons for and consequences of conversion. However, the process in between had always been undermined. Also, the concept of religious conversion as an on-going process is ignored. Qualitative research on the transformation of identity among Chinese Muslim converts are absent in the field. Thus, in this research project, I am trying to use an 'inward' perspective, by using qualitative methods, to understand the self-identification of Chinese Muslim converts. My intention in undertaking this study has been to develop an understanding of the issue which is based on an analysis of meanings imputed to their situation and articulated by the subjects themselves. Thus, this research has focused on the respondents' conceptualization of ethnicity and religion, and how they respond to the conflict between their ethnic and religious identity as a result of conversion.

THE RESPONDENTS[5]

Eighteen Chinese Muslims converts were identified as the core-respondents and at least one in-depth interview was conducted with each of them. Since there are no visible communities of Chinese Muslim converts, the respondents were located through them being: (1) members of government-sponsored Islamic organizations, including *Persatuan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia* (Malaysian Islamic Welfare Organization or PERKIM) and Malaysian Muslim Converts Association (MACMA); and non-governmental Islamic organizations including Islamic Outreach (ABIM); and (2) students and staff in National University of Malaysia (UKM)[6]. Interviews were conducted based on an interview schedule. The schedule served as a guide for the researcher to ask relevant questions during the interview. The schedule was divided into five parts: (1) respondents' background, to ensure that their personal particulars were accurately collected; (2) relationship with family before and after conversion; (3) conversion, reason for conversion and the process they had gone through; (4) ethnicity, how they

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[5] Throughout the paper, pseudonyms are given to replace respondents' real names in order to protect their privacy.
[6] For the period of research, I was a Postgraduate Fellow of the Institut Kajian Malaysia Dan Antarabangsa (IKMAS) [Institute of Malaysian and International Studies], Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia [National University of Malaysia] from June to July 2003.

perceive themselves as Chinese; and (5) religious practices, how they learn about the religion and how involve they are in the religion.

The empirical material discussed in this paper is derived from the formal interviews held with these 18 core respondents. The sample comprised 12 men and six women, eight of whom I met through the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association, four through Islamic Outreach ABIM, one through the advertisement in the UKM campus and five through personal introductions by fellow-respondents. At the time of the interviews, all were aged between 22 to 50, and more than half of them were aged over 30. Seven of the males and two of the females were married; of the married respondents, there is one case of dual marriage, who had a Malay wife and an Arab wife; four had married Malays; one had married a Chinese Muslim and one had married a Filipino. Among the respondents, all had received education at least to the high school level, with seven having finished college. One of them is pursing a Bachelors' degree, three were Bachelors' degree holder, two were pursing a Masters' degree, two held a Masters' degree, and three were PhD degree holders.

Because of the small sample size, one of the problems associated with the study is its inability to provide a representative sample of Chinese Muslims in Malaysia. Indeed, my sample of respondents was biased in several ways. The most significant problem is that it is weighted in favour of an educated group that is inclined to identify with the Chinese community in one way or another, and is also interested in learning about Islam and really do practice their religion. This bias was unavoidable; it simply was not possible for me to come into contact with individuals who had completely cut themselves off from the Chinese community, given my 'snowballing' approach to building up a network of respondents and the fact that many of my initial points of contact were university and Islamic organizations. I am not able to gain access to the group of converts who embrace Islam for 'practical reasons' like marriage and do not practice the religion, or who are not involved in those organizations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: THE CONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCT-ION OF IDENTITIES OF CHINESE MUSLIM CONVERTS

During the process of conversion, there are two major identities being constructed and reconstructed among Chinese Muslim converts – their ethnic identity and their religious identity. Three major aspects are highlighted in this section to demonstrate that this 'reconstruction of identities' after conversion is a highly complex and diverse phenomenon.

Construction of Muslim identity: knowledge about Islam

Islamic teaching is based on the holy book – the Qur'an. Literacy is the basic requirement for believers to practice the religion. Reciting the original text from the Qur'an, which is in Arabic language, is the core part of the prayers. The five pillars of Islam is the foundation of Muslims' life. They are including: (1) faith or belief in the Oneness of God and the finality of the prophethood of Muhammad;

(2) establishment of the daily prayers; (3) concern for almsgiving to the needy; (4) self-purification through fasting; and (5) the pilgrimage to Mecca for those who are able (Esposito 2003). In order to be able to perform these five pillars, followers are required to understand the language and meanings of the Qur'an and to know the rituals of prayer and pilgrimage. These doctrines are essential for converts to pass as a convert.

Ma (1996) states that one of the common problems faced by Chinese Muslim converts is that:

> before they are presented with a good knowledge on the essence and basic values of Islam, they are made to start learning how to pray, memorize verses in Arabic, and are immediately bogged by do's and don'ts on petty, mainly cultural issues.

In her studies, Ma confirms that Malay community usually judges Chinese converts by saying that they are new to the religion and their understanding of Islam is not as good as them. They distrust that new converts live in Islamic way. Some even go as far as to treat converts as 'second-class Muslims' because of the assumption of new converts are lack of knowledge about the religion.

In response to this concern, questions about how the converts learnt about the Islamic doctrines had been asked during the interviews. Respondents had different ways to do so. There is one group of four respondents who seldom or never participated in classes organized by the government and NGOs like Islamic Outreach ABIM, MACMA, or PERKIM. They mainly learned about the religion through reading, family (Malay family, for those who married with Malay), friends and the *Imam* from the mosque where they were attached.

The other 14 regularly participate in classes for converts organized by NGOs or the government and other activities organized by the Islamic Outreach ABIM, MACMA and PERKIM. On top of that, they also acquire knowledge by reading books on Islam.

Five respondents had received formal training in Islam at a religious institution and/or at universities. One respondent furthered her study in Islamic Family Law for her Masters degree. Three respondents had studied in the Dakwah Institute of PERKIM[7] and had formal training in religious preaching. Two of them had furthered their studies overseas on Islamic preaching, Arabic language and Islamic theology. Another respondent had received his doctoral degree in Islamic theology.

For some respondents, learning about Islam and the construction of Muslim identities is a response to distrust from the Malay community. Ishaq (50, con-

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[7] This institute was established in 1962 for the purpose of training converts and non-Malay Muslims youth to become religious teachers and da'ie to serve their respective communities. The institute is also open to foreign students. For more information, see the website for PERKIM at http://www.perkim.net.my.

verted for 24 years) said that as a convert, he had to study extra hard to prove himself as a 'real Muslim'.

During the process of learning about the religion, respondents mentioned that there is advantage for a new convert as they are more sincere about the religion. Sara (25, converted for two years), who is pursing her masters' degree in Islamic law, said that for people who are born as Muslim usually take things for granted:

> They may not be interested in knowing about the religion be-cause it is too easy for them to have it. But for me, conversion is a 'rediscovering of truth' which makes me have more motivation to learn about the religion. Also, I want to have more understanding about Islam so that I can explain to my parents and family about it.

Generally, respondents' background, their reasons for conversion and what kind of social support they received are the major reasons for them to take up differ-ent ways to construct their Muslim identity. These different ways, consequently, will lead to different levels of religious affiliation and Muslim identity. Thus it is difficult to jump to the conclusion that Chinese Muslim converts usually lack of knowledge about Islam, or that the Malay way of life is the only way for them to become a 'real' Muslim.

Reconstructing Chinese identity: What is Chinese-ness?

As discussed above, 'Chinese' is a constructed concept (Tan 1982), although it is a social norm that people are divided along the ethnic lines in Malaysia. How-ever, how we define 'Chinese'? What does 'Chinese-ness' mean? Vivienne Wee (1988) has suggested that Chinese-ness is a problematic concept. She suggests that Chinese identity is an ascriptive label that is not able to be achieved by self. She states,

> One can either become or un-become Chinese. Chinese identity cannot be achieved through cultural change' and the Chinese identity is 'ancestor-given, ascribed, and cannot be easily shaken off, changed or replaced (Wee 1988).

In the case of Chinese Muslims in this study, all respondents identified them-selves as Chinese without hesitation. It shows that once Chinese identity is ascribed it is difficult to change and replace. However, since the identity is 'ascribed by others', Chinese Muslim converts must face challenges from other Chinese. Some of the respondents reported that they felt offended and frus-trated when their Chinese identity was challenged because of their conversion. Thus, we can examine the dynamic in how they respond to such challenges and how they renegotiate their Chinese identity.

Sara's conversion was unknown to her parents but her aunties, who also live in Kuala Lumpur, knew about it. They had criticized her for her way of dressing, saying that she was losing her Chinese identity:

> *The day when I was talking with my aunt, she asked, 'Why [do] you wear long sleeves and you don't wear [a] skirt?' I can't say much, you can tell from her face [that she wanted to say something]. Then she said, 'You don't look Chinese anymore'. I asked, 'Why? How come?' The way you dress does not really [represent who you are] … I am still Chinese – my blood, my face, all Chinese, everything. And I can speak Chinese. They said they just know that I am not Chinese anymore. I was thinking why did they have such mind set.… Why don't they complain [about] those who are so keen to learn English and those who don't even speak Chinese? ... They think that [the way you dress is] more important, you must dress and talk like a Chinese. And they will say that if you dress like this [wearing a head scarf], you are not Chinese anymore.*

In Chuah's (2001) work on Chinese Muslims in Malaysia, he used several indicators to measure Chinese-ness, in terms of how much they practice 'Chinese customs'. These customs include ancestor worship, celebrating Chinese New Year[8], celebrating the Moon Cake Festival (or Mid-Autumn Festival)[9], and idol worship. It is interesting to note that when talking about celebrating Chinese festivals, a lot of respondents specifically mentioned that Muslims are also able to celebrate as long as they do not participate in the religious aspects of the festivals. For instance, Lee (42, converted for ten years) said that he is Chinese because:

> *'I celebrate Chinese New Year. I will go back to my mother's home for Chinese New Year. On Ching Ming Festival[10] she wants to go back to her hometown, and I will go back with her, but I don't go to the praying stuff, you know, burning incense and all those things.*

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[8] Chinese New Year is the first day of New Year based on the lunar calendar. It is considered as the most important festival for Chinese. Houses are cleaned and decorated. Each family will have a reunion dinner on New Year's Eve and every member of the family is expected to be present. 'Red-packet' (money inside a red envelope) will be given by seniors to juniors. It is also important to worship the ancestors on New Year's Eve and also the first day of New Year. Worship of the ancestors and worship to the God of Heaven are important parta in the celebration (for details, see Wong 1987; Lai 1984; Lo & Comber 1958).

[9] The Moon Cake Festival, or Mid-Autumn Festival, falls on the 15th of the eighth month of the lunar calendar. It originated from China when the Chinese overthrew the Mongol Empire under the Yuan dynasty. It is also another important festival for Chinese because it is another time for family reunion (for details, see Wong 1987; Lai 1984; Lo & Comber 1958).

[10] Ching Ming Festival, falls in the 3rd month of the lunar calendar, and is when Chinese families show their respect by visiting the graves of their ancestors to clear away weeds, touch up gravestone inscriptions and make offerings of wine and fruit.

Ong (38, converted for eight years) also said that every year he will go back to his hometown and celebrate the *Ching Ming* Festival with his mother. He will accompany his mother to his ancestors' grave and sometimes he will help to sweep and clean up the grave, but will not offer incense and participate in the religious part of celebration.

A number of respondents mentioned that they will go back to their hometown and celebrate Chinese New Year with their families, but will not participate in ancestor or idol worship and do not eat non-Halal food. Yaamen (29, converted for 11 years) mentioned that sometimes there is tension during the reunion dinner, as when his grandmother offered him alcoholic drinks and pork and he refused:

> *Actually my family did not have a very strong response to my conversion; of course, my mother is not very happy with that but it's OK. My sister and her husband are Christian and my mother is Buddhist, so generally we respect each other's religion at home. It is easier for them to understand. But for the older generation, it is more difficult. I remember one time, during Chinese New Year, I was at my grandma's place for the reunion dinner. She offered me beer, and kept asking me why I don't drink the beer. I said I don't want it, but you know, for old people it could be offending. My mom tried to help me to explain. But we couldn't tell her the reason is that I converted to Islam and that's why I cannot drink beer. So … there was some tension, but not very serious ... but generally, my family is very understanding about this.*

Constructing new identity: adopting an Islamic name or maintaining a Chinese name

According to Ebrey (1996: 12), the Chinese family name is central to 'the notion of ancestors and marriage: ancestors shared one's surname; marriage partners did not'. Family name is much more important than personal name and it is important for both personal and group identity. The Chinese family system is rooted in Confucian thinking about the largest 'we-group' and it allows people to trace back their ancestry, by passing the family name from the father's side (Ebrey 1996).

However in Islam, like other religions such as Christianity and Buddhism, adopting a new name at the time of conversion signifies a new beginning of a converts' life. Converts are 'typically given Muslim names as a sign of conversion' (Esposito 2003: 228). It is because name is given according to certain guidance in the tradition of Islam. As indicated by Hughes (1965), a Muslim usually has a name that accords with the teaching of Muhammad. The teachings include: (1) the best name to use is Abdullah (i.e. servant of God); (2) name children after the prophet (i.e. Mohammad); (3) give a proper name that does not over-exaggerate the ability and power of one person, etc. (Hughes

1965). Thus, it is common for converts to adopt an Islamic name in order to fit with these guidelines.

Due to its significant role in Chinese tradition, according to one respondent, changing one's name is a 'sensitive issue' for Chinese Muslim converts. Ma (1996) quoted Lee How Lan's studies on the inter-ethnic marriage between Chinese and Malay in Malaysia, 'Chinese parents are especially angered at a son changing their family name, because this would mean that their family name would cease to appear in the following generation's name' (Ma 1996). Yusof (29 year-old, converted for 11 years) illustrated this issue when he stated:

> *[My family] think that I decided to convert and change my name as a symbolic action to signify that I cut off the relationship with them immediately.*

Before 1996, converts who registered with the *Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor* (JAIS), or Department of Islamic Affairs and Administration of Selangor, were required to adopt an Islamic name and put 'binte Abdullah' (for female, i.e. daughter of the servant of God) or 'bin Abdullah' (for male, i.e. son of the servant of God) at the end to signify their convert identity. Since 1996 it has not been compulsory for converts to adopt an Islamic name. However, it is still a compulsory in some other states due to the different requirements of their *Jabatan Agama Islam*. In Selangor, converts are free to maintain their original name, or to put their original and Islamic name together. Institutionally, there is no obligation to change one's name for conversion. Nevertheless, due to the ineffective implementation of this policy, some of my respondents, who converted in 2001, told me that officers still asked for their Muslim name when they went to register their Muslim status.[11]

Maintaining their Chinese name, especially their surname, is the most popular topic in talking about Chinese identity among the respondents. Generally, I found that there were three different responses towards the issue of changing a name. The first group of respondents had very strong feelings about the issues. They resisted when they were asked to change their name during the registration process with the government. For some, they registered with their Islamic name when they converted because the regulation required them to do so. However, they only use their Chinese name to identify themselves in daily life.

Ong (38, converted for eight years) had registered his Islamic name with the *Jabatan Agama Islam* when he converted. He had not wanted to do this but at the time it was compulsory under the religious law in Selangor. However, he never used his Islamic name in daily life and he only uses his Chinese name on his business card and for publication. He explained:

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[11] The details on the inefficiency of the implementation of policy in religious department about converts' issues had been discussed in detail in Rosey Ma's 1996 thesis on the problem that Chinese Muslims are facing.

I am working in an Islamic NGO and people at work all know that I am a Muslim. I had been published in some newspapers for a long time already and sometimes I even give talks to the public about Islam. My Muslim identity is well-known and I do not need to use an Islamic name to make it clear.

Ng (25, converted for four years) had registered his Islamic name with the government but regretted having done so, stating:

It is compulsory [to change our name when we convert]. But now I regret it. I regretted that I changed my name. It is not just about the name, [conversion] is not about what name you use, but what is important is what is in your heart and your knowledge. Now I regret it. Now I use my Chinese name in my formal daily life ... although I lost my identity card once, but I didn't put my Islamic name [on it] because I wanted my Chinese name on my identity card. If I change my name, my parents will find out…. It is still better to use my Chinese name because I am a Chinese, I don't want people thinking that I am becoming Malay or something like that.

Sara (25, converted for two years) had registered an Islamic name when she first converted. However, she changed back to her original Chinese name when the officers from the *Jabatan Agama Islam* requested that she had to change the name on her official documents such as identity card to her new registered name, and she refused to do so. Most of the time she uses her Chinese name to identify herself. She says,

[When I introduce myself], I use my Chinese name. But if they are Malay … they usually try to question a lot. Sometimes … it is very funny, because in Islam, we only change our name if the name brings bad meanings. But they don't know. It is like [once you convert] you have to change your name. So I just tell them my Islamic name, and then they will not question too much.

Lee (42, converted for ten years), who converted because of marriage, had not changed her name on any official document. Since her marriage is registered overseas and she feels that religion is a personal matter, she did not register her Muslim status with the *Jabatan Agama Islam* in Malaysia and she uses only her Chinese name in daily life.

For the second group of respondents, although they express discontent that they were requested to change their name by the authorities, at the same time, they believe that it is 'natural' for a convert to adopt an Islamic name. They tend to use their Islamic name in daily life, but retain their Chinese name.

Yusof converted when he was studying overseas. When he came back to Malaysia, he wanted to legalize his Muslim status so he tried to register with the

Jabatan Agama Islam. However, he had a very bad experience with the officer in the department who questioned him about his Islamic knowledge, his sincerity to Islam and requested him to change to an Islamic name. He was angry with the imposition of the changing name policy; however, he was willing to adopt an Islamic name. He explained:

> *I want my parents to know that I am not becoming Malay. I'm [Muslim] but I'm still a Chinese. I refused to wear Malay clothes.… I refused to look or act like a Malay because I want to quote to my parents, 'I'm not a Malay, I'm still Chinese and Muslim'. That is what I want to prove; that's the principle for me. Because of that problem with the officer, I don't want to change my name. But I did change my name in the end. I don't regret it, I don't mind to have a Muslim name. I just don't want people think that I have become Malay…. I did changed my name on my identity card and stuff, so I introduce myself with my Muslim name. I don't call it a Malay name because it's a Muslim name. I don't mind having that name. In fact, I prefer people to call me by my Muslim name, more than a Christian name because it will cause confusion. But if a convert comes to me and says that 'I don't want to change my name', I will say, 'That's OK, don't change your name'.*

Han (22 year-old, converted for 18 months), whose conversion is concealed from his parents, does not want to change his name on his identity card because he does not want his parents to misunderstand that he will give up his Chinese identity. However, he likes people to call him by his Islamic name, explaining,

> *it is a very good name, [it] has a very good meaning. I'd like people call me by this name and I hope that one day I will be a person like that, [with good characteristics as indicated by the name].*

The third group of respondents had not resisted or felt bad when they were asked to change to an Islamic name. They only use their Islamic name to identify themselves in daily life.

Aishah (23, converted for four months) was willing to adopt an Islamic name, although no one in the *Jabatan Agama Islam* asked her to change her name when she registered:

> *They didn't ask me to. Somehow, I felt ready to choose a Muslim name … have a Muslim name, have an Arabic name, for the good meaning, why not?*

Fatima (45, converted for 14 years) faced dilemma between the family pressure and her personal preference for an Islamic name:

> *My father was not very happy with it actually. He said 'I gave you a beautiful name, why [do] you want to change it?' But then it was the government's law, you see, whoever becomes Muslim has to change the name. Then I told him, 'Never mind, I changed my name but I still put my surname there, the "Lee", the surname is still there.' … For me, it is OK. I become a Muslim, I make my own identity. When people look at me they know that I'm Muslim. It's good to be identified as Muslim. I'd like people to call my Muslim name.*

Fahyim (50, converted for 25 years) shares the same opinion that an Islamic name provides him a stronger Muslim identity. He explained:

> *[Changing name] is something natural, nobody said anything about that [in the registration]…. I took it as something natural that when I become Muslim, I will have a Muslim name. Nobody specifically said that I need to have a Muslim name … if not I would be no different with any Chinese who is not Muslim. I want my Muslim identity to stand out from the name.*

The major function of the Chinese surname is to pass it to the next generation so that people can trace back the origin of ancestors and maintain the network among the family. Five male respondents who were married and have children shared a very similar attitude towards passing the surname to their children. Four of the married-male respondents emphasized that it is important to pass their family name to their children. Sadit (44, converted for 12 years) mentioned that:

> *On my children's birth certificate, they all have an Islamic name followed by a Chinese name. It is very important for them to know about their surname because it is passed from our ancestors.*

Yusof, Fahyim and Ishaq also provided similar accounts that passing their surname to their children is important for them to know about their Chinese roots. However, three of them did not give a Chinese personal name to their children but only an Islamic name followed by their Chinese surname. Idris (38, converted for 14 years), who had given his children an English name follow by Chinese surname explained:

> *They don't have Chinese names. They all have their names. I don't call it a Muslim name. I don't put Chinese names so that they don't feel attached to their Chinese names and [will] be a more global person.*

Because of the patrilineal system, two female respondents who are married and have children showed different attitudes towards the issue because their children follow their husband's surname.

The reason for these diverse responses towards this issue, based on the preliminary analysis, is because of the respondents' different background/ socialization. Other than the macro-social factors (e.g. ethnic relations in Malaysia, Chinese traditional values, etc.), micro-social factors such as family, education, types of friends, etc. are important mediums of socialization and these factors affected respondents' attitude towards the issue. For the group one respondents, all experienced strong opposition from the family against their conversion. For Ong and Sara, their conversion is still unknown by their family. But for the respondents in group three, their conversion was generally accepted by their family, or at least, there were no strong opposition towards their decision. However, family factors may not be the sole force that shape respondents' attitudes, as we can see in group two, there are cases from both sides (with and without family support) but they still tend to identify themselves with a Muslim name. However, at least one point is substantiated – that family is the main reason of why respondents consciously maintain their Chinese name or struggle with adopting an Islamic name.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted that the reconstruction of identities after religious conversion is a highly complex and diverse phenomenon. During the process of conversion, Chinese Muslim converts had gone through different levels of identity reconstruction in different aspects. These reconstructions happened when they were, on the one hand, attaining their new religious identity and, on the other, maintaining their ethnic identity.

Three major aspects are identified by the Chinese Muslims converts in the reconstruction of identities. Firstly, actively learning about Islamic teaching is considered as a process to construct their religious identity. At the same time, for some respondents, it is also a means to prove their Muslim identity to their Malay counterparts. Secondly, for some respondents, the practice of Chinese customs is interpreted as an indicator to maintain their Chinese identity. There was a negotiation between their religion and ethnic practices. As long as it is not against their religious teaching, they would like to practice Chinese customs such as celebrating the Chinese New Year and other Chinese festivals. Thirdly, maintaining a Chinese family name is a major concern when they tried to attain their new religious identity. Adopting an Islamic name is a process of Muslim identity construction but, at the same time, due to the antipathetic nature of Chinese and Malay identities, Chinese Muslims are always sensitive in the issue of change of name. The respondents had various responses. Some prefer to use their Islamic name. However, as they do not want to disaffect their family or they do not want to be misinterpreted as becoming Malay, they are still consciously maintaining their Chinese family name.

To conclude, it is found that the construction and reconstruction of identities among Chinese Muslims converts is central to the differentiation between being a Chinese, being Malay and being a Muslim. However, these constructions and

reconstructions are diverse and complex in nature. Different background, reasons for conversion and social support they received shaped their attitudes on how to construct their Muslim identity and reconstruct their Chinese identity. These different attitudes, consequently, will produce different 'outcomes', or what some social scientists will understand as 'becoming more Malay or becoming less Chinese'. Thus, in order to have a better understanding about Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia, we should not only generalize the 'causes' and 'effects' but should also focus on the dynamics inside the process of reproduction of identities.

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