

Situating Transnational Islam in *Nanyang* History from the Colonial to the Postcolonial Era: Life Historical Accounts of a Southeast Asian Muslim Family Diaspora

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Abstract

This article explores the changing Southeast Asian Muslim diaspora from the colonial to the postcolonial era. Based on the ethnographic and oral accounts of two Muslim brothers coming from the same Southeast Asian family, and particularly focusing on the diasporic experience of the elder brother's migration from Pakistan to Hong Kong and finally to Britain, the article shows how the European colonial expansion in Southeast Asia altered the paths of the Muslim diaspora. By comparing the experience of the elder brother in Britain with his younger brother in Hong Kong, this article suggests the importance of agency, in the sense that one's life history, personal encounter, and different interpretations of Islam are vital determinants as regards their paths in the diaspora and their evaluations toward non-Muslim host societies in both the West and the East.

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Introduction: Methods and Research Processes

Much of the contemporary scholarly debate on issues related to the Muslim minority and the diaspora focuses on the cultural adaptation of Muslims in the West. However, it is interesting to note that the media representation of Muslim groups in the West is geographically, culturally, and ethnically limited. For instance, the media commonly refers to Muslim ethnic groups in Britain as being from Pakistan and India, or the Arab world and Turkey, or as Black (members of the Nation of Islam).¹ Of course, the recent soaring numbers of Eastern European refugees and asylum seekers and local converts are becoming more visible in the European context. Nevertheless, the existing literature pays inadequate attention to Muslims who do not come from any of those regions.

The livelihoods and cultural identity struggles of other ethnic Muslims are hardly mentioned in the existing literature. For example, Muslims of Southeast Asian heritage are rarely identified as being part of Islamic communities in the West. In a more colloquial Chinese language term, this article will try to ground the findings of the Muslim diaspora within the wider context of *Nanyang* (South Sea), which in contemporary international discourse is known as Southeast Asia. *Nanyang* is neither a political nor geographical concept; rather, it carries a business connotation that refers to the naval outreach from Mainland China and within the South China Sea. Without strictly defining this geographical image, *Nanyang* is a wider geographical concept than the conventional definition of Southeast Asia, for it covers areas from the coastal areas of ancient China, the islands of Indonesia, British Borneo, and the Philippines.²

In this article, I conduct an exploratory study on the life history of a Southeast Asian Muslim family living between Britain and Hong Kong and its implication for the transnational network. By referring to *Nanyang*, we discuss the history of maritime commercial interactions before and after the various European empires. Within the context of the discussion, this article explores my interviewees' narratives within the Muslim diaspora. In-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted in my field research. Through interviewing two Muslim brothers from an ethnic Muslim family, who now live separately in Hong Kong and Britain, respectively, their life history narratives were recorded. The study examines and compares their everyday experiences, the elder brother's reasons and motivations for migrating to Britain, and the younger brother's decision to stay in postcolonial Hong Kong; their attitudes toward the host

government and society; and their distinctive interpretation of Islam as a religion and a way of life.

For privacy and the protection of my respondents, their identities are concealed to a certain extent and not all of their personal particulars are disclosed. Accordingly, their names are kept in pseudonymous manner, namely, Ahmed's family. Thus, the article adopts Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory of narrative and relation between life and story. As a result, their life stories are told with specific characters and, finally, their lives are narrated as a plot. The respondents' characters are expressed through this narrative strategy.³ In this vein, the two subjects are then dramatized as "Ahmed the Hermit" (the elder brother in Britain) and "Ahmed the Radical" (the younger brother in Hong Kong).

From Movement of Goods to Muslim Diaspora: The British Empire Brings Muslims into the Chinese Ports

The brothers' father came from India before it was partitioned in 1947. The following story of "forced" migration marks and reflects the macroscopic changes in Southeast Asia politics. Due to the strategic consideration of the British colonial empire's interest in East Asia, my respondents' father was recruited by the British army and his family was brought to Hong Kong, a southern port and a gateway to China. Ahmed the Hermit stated that his father,

... was in the British army. And then when he resigned or was discharged from the army, he came down to Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, he worked in the ship guard, and there have been many ... You know, in those days they fought the pirates, pirates are supposed to rob the ships. So, he was hurt a couple of times while fighting.

Q: Was your father also working in the prison?

A: No, no. He was not in the prison order. He was on the ship. As I said, those pirate ships were active in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. You know, on the coastline of China. There are many ports, you know. Those ships go up and down. In those days, to go to Macau it took four hours. [...] now it takes, of course, half an hour. In those days, the ship had, you know, to go along the coast; it took them four hours to go to Macau. So, on every ship they had guards, because there used [to] be pirates all over the South China coast. So, in those situations, he used to fight the pirates, when the pirates [would] come on to the ships. And then he was injured a couple of

times, and I say this because when I was working in the electricity company, there was also a watchman there ... [who worked] together with my father. So, that's how [I know, because] he tells me these things.

Taking my respondents' family history as a microscopic lens shows the wider but implicit transformation of Southeast Asia's ports from simply market places of exchange in the precolonial era into military sites. In these ports, the colonial empires deployed their naval forces for defense, and politicians and merchants entered the scene to pursue and expand the empire's interests. My respondent's narration of his father being recruited by the British army to fight pirates demonstrates the importance of ports at that time.

This example also reveals that the critical role of Southeast Asian ports was rather different in the colonial era when compared to that of the postcolonial era. In other words, maritime business interactions within Southeast Asia depended upon the empires' colonial control of the ports, upon which their military expansion also depended. When studying the Southeast Asian Muslim diaspora during the British colonial period, the role of the region's ports should not be overlooked. Thus, my study shows that the consequences of the ports' changing role is significant, for the alteration of maritime control also brought forth different trajectories of the Southeast Asian Muslim diaspora in more recent years.

Before going into any depth and situating my respondents' data, it would be useful to provide the general history of Islam in Hong Kong. Indeed, most contemporary Muslims believe that the first Muslim community in Hong Kong arrived via British colonial rule. Since Hong Kong came under British rule in the middle of the nineteenth century, and since the influx of Chinese Muslims due to the civil war in Mainland China and the Korean War, Ahmed the Radical told me about the relocation of Southeast Asian Muslims through ports by the British army long before the Chinese Muslims arrived in Hong Kong⁴:

Islam is [in] Hong Kong; alright, Islam came to Hong Kong about 150 years ago, and the people who brought Islam to Hong Kong were all Indian. They came with the British army and with the Hong Kong Police. They came and were employed in the prison department and most of the other Hong Kong departments. The British people brought them down, and most of them were Muslims. So they [established] a mosque [and a] cemetery for the community. The Chinese Muslims [...] came to Hong Kong when China was fighting [its civil war ... in 1938].

Perhaps the most important historical fact revealed by my two informants is that the British colonial empire brought Muslims from India and Malaya to Hong Kong and Macau. There, they served the empire in different sectors. My respondents' parents came from India in 1901. Their father was originally from India, but after the Subcontinent's partition in 1947, they considered themselves to be Pakistani. Their mother, a Malaysian Chinese, moved to Hong Kong due to the British colonial policy. In this sense, my respondents' identity is complicated and hybrid in character: The father is Pakistani and the mother is Malaysian, but they were raised in a Chinese cultural environment and as members of a British colony.

Those Muslims recruited by the British served in the Indian army. They worked in prisons, police departments, and other security forces for the British government. Another respondent informed me that his family was active mainly in the carpet and rug business. Still, they had a very close affection and link with the Indian army. When asked about his father, Ahmed the Hermit told me that his father had come to Hong Kong with the British army. Though many Indians were recruited as prison guards, his father was recruited to serve on a guard ship in order to combat pirates along the South China coastline.

Obviously, the ports had a military and strategic value for the empire. In order to enhance and maintain security, the empire brought South Asian Muslims to serve in the British army, and some, like my informants' father, served with the naval forces. Thus, Ahmed the Hermit was called into the army when he was a teenager.

The British colonial empire brought Muslim soldiers from India to Hong Kong in 1842. Some Muslim merchants followed them, and other Muslim businessmen and traders from India, Shanghai, and other areas arrived soon afterwards. As Hong Kong's Muslim population increased and formed a distinct community, the government allocated land to enable them to build mosques and cemeteries.

Approaching the End of Colonial Rule: Muslim Minorities on the Move Again When "The Fire Was Very Strong"

The story of the ethnic Muslim community came to a crossroads as Hong Kong approached 1997, for that was the termination date of the Sino-British treaty that had made Hong Kong a British colony. Before 1997, Muslim minorities faced a choice: accept Beijing's resumption of sover-

eignty over Hong Kong or seek residency from London. Alternatively, they needed to find other ways of emigrating.

This historical watershed divided ethnic Muslims in terms of nationality and where they preferred to settle, and also set ethnic Muslims from Hong Kong on different diasporic paths in the postcolonial era. Even members from the same Muslim family, bloodline, and lineage faced the question of loyalty as to which nationality they belonged. Under this historical epoch, a new page is opening for some choosing to live as minority members of non-Muslim polities. The Ahmed brothers, torn between staying and leaving, have different stories and struggles. The historical juncture of 1997 triggered the next phase of the Southeast Asian Muslim diaspora.

This crisis of confidence in the 1990s intensified due to the tragic crackdown on the Chinese students' movement at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Consequently, the Hong Kong people's demands for British citizenship in order to safeguard an uncertain future increased. The British Parliament, seeking to reassure them that the British government would continue to take moral responsibility for them if the Chinese government did not honor its 50-year pledge of Hong Kong's self-government without external political intervention, passed a bill in April 1990 to grant full British citizenship to the 50,000 heads of households as a kind of insurance in case Beijing harmed the Hong Kong people.

However, this quota was offered to the upper class and the elite of society. In other words, the lower classes and ethnic minorities holding British Dependent Territory Citizenship (BDTC) passports were completely ignored. Before 1997, these ethnic minorities belonged "nowhere," for they were neither officially recognized as British subjects by London nor as being "Chinese" by Hong Kong. Though Beijing officials showed an optimistic attitude by giving HKSAR [Hong Kong Special Administrative Region] passports to all non-Chinese, the ethnic minorities were more interested in obtaining British passports.⁵ The ambiguities of citizenship, therefore, pushed the ethnic minorities to rethink their residency.

Much earlier, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher inaugurated the issue of sovereignty while visiting Beijing in the early 1980s. The social panic resulting from the communist regime's intrusion into Hong Kong's existing capitalist social system was strong. Many people were anxious to get as many foreign passports as possible in order to secure a safe haven in the event a similar social upheaval like the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76) or a repeat of the Tiananmen Square incident in Hong Kong. In that societal context, the Ahmed brothers were called to

be alert for their own families. Ahmed the Hermit, having been a local boy, told the story of his decision to leave Hong Kong for Britain:

Q: Is it true that you moved to Britain after 1985?

A: I moved here in 1986. You see, by that time everybody wanted a British passport. Everybody wanted a foreign passport ... any foreign passport. And we were born in Hong Kong. Our original passports say that we are British subjects, citizens of the United Kingdom and the colonies. So, we are entitled to British citizenship, here. Before that, when we were young, there was no such thing as citizenship. It happened during the 1960s, something like that. Then they drew the line in 1970 or 1980. Then [...] Margaret Thatcher went down to China and told the Chinese government: "I give you back Hong Kong." They [Chinese officials] never asked for it. The Chinese government never said to the Hong Kong government or British government: "Give me back Hong Kong." Never. [...] Margaret Thatcher did this after the Falklands War. Then she thought that she was an iron lady, a great warrior, you know, a very generous warrior lady who went down there and said: "I give you back Hong Kong." Then our problem starts and everybody wants a foreign passport because they are afraid of China. Because by that time, China was very communistic, you know. So, everybody is afraid. You can't blame them, especially people who have money. You can't blame them. So, at the end of the day, I said the best thing to do is to talk to my wife: "We'd better do that also." So eventually, of course after all these years, my wife is a British citizen [...] my two daughters are British citizens, and I am the last one, a British citizen also. I got my passport one or two years ago. So, at the end of the day, everybody wanted something. The fire was very strong...

Ahmed the Hermit finally migrated to Britain and worked in his older sister's family business: a Chinese restaurant.

However, the decision to leave was not the whole picture of the community at that time. Unlike his older brother, Ahmed the Radical, decided to stay in Hong Kong. Although he has the right of abode to migrate to Britain, British immigration did not grant the right of abode to his son. Therefore, Ahmed the Radical, who felt disappointed, finally gave up the idea of leaving, and resented the British government because of its denial of British citizenship to his son. Eventually, the two brothers continued on their roads forward in two different places.

In the following section, I discuss the decisions of the Southeast Asian Muslims facing a new life under Beijing's rule. Ahmed the Radical stays in Hong Kong and joins in the struggle for the rights of ethnic Muslims in the new Chinese-dominated Hong Kong government. Ahmed the Hermit starts his life of retirement in Britain. The same historical epoch inaugurated the birth of two distinct stories living in two non-Muslim host societies.

Hospitality or Hostility?: Different Stories and Experiences of Living within a non-Muslim Host

Perhaps Southeast Asian Muslims in the West represent the most silent ethnic minority. My ethnographic study revealed that Southeast Asian Muslims employ some implicit tactics that mainstream British society cannot easily identify as "Muslim"; rather, they are identified as "Chinese" or immigrants from Southeast Asia. It seems that their Muslim identity is concealed and becomes invisible in the public sphere. On the one hand, their hidden Muslim identity delivers them from the stigmatization and hatred that follows when a wave of anti-Islamic xenophobia spreads through British society. On the other hand, the dilemma is that neither the Muslim community nor the host society recognizes their existence.

The following paragraphs clarify the invisibility of Southeast Asian Muslims in both the British and Hong Kong Chinese societies. And yet the general marginal position of Southeast Asian Muslims in host societies cannot be explained by the same rationale. However, we will see that their ethnic Southeast Asian Muslim identity intermingles closely with their concrete societal contexts. As a consequence, they behave completely differently in terms of everyday lifestyles and interpretations of Islamic practices.

One Family: Two Elders, Two Cities, and Two Tales

STORY 1: RETREAT TO SOLITUDE: FROM "LOCAL BOY" TO SOLITARY HERMIT

"...I want to live my life peacefully and die peacefully."

(Ahmed the Hermit)

Nationalism and Its Discontents: Lamentations on the Southeast Asian Muslim Ummah's Disintegration after the Japanese Occupation. It is intriguing for my respondent Ahmed the Hermit to tell of his discontent with Hong Kong's Muslim community and finally choosing self-exile and retreating from the community's disputes, despite being originally very

active in its welfare and development. He witnessed many changes and transformations in his Islamic community. For the Ahmed brothers, World War II and its aftermath were the watershed events of the community's social history. Before the Japanese occupied Hong Kong (December 1941 to August 1945), Ahmed the Hermit observed that the Islamic community had maintained a strong sense of solidarity. This piece of community history serves as a nostalgic memory for him:

Q: So, how about the post-Japanese occupation?

A: Then, at that time, the Muslim community was quite united during the Japanese occupation. You see, many Muslims, who are like Malays, may be Chinese. They are all too friendly to the Indians. So, the Indians help them in Indian finance and get the food also. So, I remember one day, I said to one Malay man: "You are Malay, you are not Indian." He said: "Look, we are all Muslims." That time, I realized Muslims are together.

However, a wave of decolonization occurred and triggered a transformation of personal political identity. For Ahmed the Hermit, the nationalistic spirit is one of the underlying reasons that explains the emergence of disunity within Hong Kong's Muslim community. This development disappointed him, because, in his opinion, it caused the community to decline. He finally resolved his discontent by turning inward and exiling himself from the local Muslim community:

Q: ... In the past, as you say, there was no distinction along ethnic lines. But after that, it seems that the Pakistanis came together and the Chinese came together. They separated from each other. They didn't care about each other. Why?

A: Because the world is changing. I looked at it in this way, the world is changing. Gradually, gradually, countries become independent. Malay people, who used to be Malay, become Indonesians, Malays, and Singaporeans, you know. So, gradually the nationalistic ideas got into their heads. They become more nationalized, you know. So, I am Indonesian, he is Malaysian, he is Singaporean, he is Indian, he is Pakistani, he is Chinese, you know ... And then because of this nationalistic thing ... and also the Hong Kong government said to the people: "We are going to issue you the identity card." At that moment in time, I suddenly realized that people now are properly identified. So, that was how: I checked my father's name and my birth certificate.

When remembering the Hong Kong community's past, Ahmed the Hermit talks about the good old days before World War II, when different ethnic Muslim groups came together as a community without any concern about ethnic differences. But after that war, he observed that different ethnic Muslim groups were "separated from each other" along ethnic and national lines and no longer "care[d for] each other." Ironically, the rise of national consciousness emerges with the diminishing sense of Muslim unity. The notions of citizenship and national identity were inconceivable before World War II, as was the idea of the government issuing identity cards to Hong Kong's inhabitants.

*Past, Present, and Future: Chinese Is My Identity,
Britain Is My Home, Pakistan Is on My Mind*

When asked about his plans for the future, Ahmed the Hermit said that,

... two months ago, I wanted to see my friend in Lahore. Then, this bloody American trouble started that stopped me, you know. I want to see my friend. I was talking to him on the phone. He comes every year to visit me. But then I thought that before I died, maybe a few more years left, I'd better see [my friend]. So this American thing upset my plans, you know.

Q: So you want to visit Pakistan?

A: Yeah, yeah. Lahore. Because I want him to take me to my father's place. I've never been there. When Pakistan and India became independent, I joined Pakistan. I am a Pakistani citizen, but I am [also] a British citizen, born in Hong Kong. Because Pakistan allows two citizenships, you know. So, being born in Hong Kong I am also Chinese.

September 11 disrupted his travel plans. This issue brought about a concern of being identified with different nation-states from East to West. Interestingly, Ahmed the Hermit refers to himself as both a British subject and a Pakistani by the definition of nationality. However, he is "Chinese" in terms of his birthplace, family ties, and early life history.

The ongoing diaspora experiences have shaped his intriguing multiple identities and make it difficult for people to pin down easily his exact identity. This sort of flexible citizenship has enabled Ahmed the Hermit to expose himself to different cultures, and he sometimes enjoys the advantage of free movement by choosing an appropriate passport:

Q: Now, you belong to Britain?

A: Now, of course, I hold a British passport, which is the best document now. Because of the Pakistani passport, do you know what happened to me? We went to Macau, and then, for the first time, the Macau immigration officer saw this passport, and [... that it was] issued in Beijing. At that time, Portugal did not recognize Beijing, and so the guy didn't know what to do with the passport. So, he sent for his officer and we waited down there for one hour. My friend was looking at the sky. The sky is brightening now, the morning prayer is very near, and he is, waiting for me, you know. And after the officer came and checked, he said: "Oh, where did you get this?" I said: "That was sent from Beijing." Then they passed us through and we went off. That time, I realized that this Pakistani passport is the hindrance. It does not give me free movement. So, this is why I put it aside and don't bother with it.

Narrating this past historical encounter in the Macau Muslim community after the Japanese occupation, he illustrates the case in the Macau immigration department where he learned the strategies of "disclosing" his nationality by showing the "appropriate" passport. Before Macau's handover to Beijing in 1999, the colony was ruled by Portugal. Through this kind of personal encounter, Ahmed the Hermit learned by experience and noticed which specific identity should be adopted in order to facilitate his daily convenience. As for Ahmed the Radical, he retold his diasporic story and concluded that home is where he lives. It seems that the question "Where is your home?" is too naïve to his life experience, for it is beyond the notion of national boundaries.

Not Simply Siege-Mentality: Why He Is Seemingly Invisible and Silent in Society

Q: So, you have a unique identity?

A: Everything I am telling you. I was born Muslim, my father comes from India, my mother from Malaya. My life has been spent under the British and the Japanese. So, you see, I am quite a mixture of everything. But whatever I've got, it's just only a "claim."

Q: I think that you are really unique, you know?

A: I know that, I know that, I know. That's why I'd rather not mix myself with other people. Otherwise, I will get into trouble.

Above, we observe that Ahmed the Hermit possesses multiple or flexible citizenships that give him freedom of movement. Paradoxically, these multiple identities also are, at times, inconvenient for him. He is also aware of how his multiple identities could get him into trouble. Therefore, he adopts the strategic life politics of not mixing too closely with people, even Muslims from the mosque.

Between closeness and alienation in Britain's Muslim community, Ahmed the Hermit sometimes experiences exclusion even in the mosque because of his peculiar national and cultural identity:

Q: But how about in the community? Are there any Muslims? Do you enjoy a good friendship?

A: I have one or two friends. I don't mix with many people. You see, you go to the mosque, you see everybody. They say: "Hello, hello, Islam, Islam" That's all. They do not invite you into their homes. You can't see and you don't know them very well.

Q: Why? It's really strange for me to know this, because...

A: Because I am a Chinese, I am a Hong Kong man [laughs] ...

Q: Really?

A: Because they ask the first question: "Where were you born?" I say "Hong Kong." The first thing in their mind is: "Chinese."

Muslims having a background of "Chineseness" from Southeast Asia are hardly acknowledged in western public life. Chinese Muslims in Britain, accordingly, are associated by a business link such as the take-out food business. Given this, their presence is unlike that of the South Asian Muslims, who have established mosques or other organizations in the name of Islam as a religion. Chinese Muslims therefore tacitly conceal their Islamic identity under the umbrella of a wider Chinese kinship and business network. Even Ahmed the Hermit told me that there is an absence of "Chinese" mosques in Britain – mosques solely established by and for Chinese Muslims. Chinese Muslims go to mosques built by other South Asian Muslims to pray, but remain socially distant from the mainstream ethnic Muslims in Britain.

In conclusion, Ahmed the Hermit seems to have experienced a life of ambivalence in his lifetime diaspora. Disappointed in the local Hong

Kong Muslim community, he has chosen a way of life in Britain of strategically making use of his flexible citizenships. On the one hand, these flexible citizenships have brought him a safe haven from political unrest in Hong Kong and Britain. On the other hand, he has not been able to identify completely with everyday life in his new host society. For him, he is a stranger and a hermit in both Hong Kong and Britain. He chooses to be a silent stranger on the margin of society.

**STORY 2: FORCED TO THE STAGE: FROM LOCAL BOY
TO ROARING RADICAL**

“... I don’t take many holidays. Working, working, trying to do what we can.” (Ahmed the Radical)

*Factionalism and Its Discontent: Liberation from Sectarian
Division to Religion as a Way of Life*

Q: You Muslims are a brotherhood, right?

A: Let me finish it, okay. One thing is so simple. I was going to say just what you have said. Muslims should be a brotherhood, right? Muslims should be a brotherhood. As I mentioned to you before, after the war, the people acquired knowledge. They began to boast and become arrogant. “We are Chinese, strictly for Chinese.” “We are an Islamic Union, strictly for Malays.” There are many organizations. There are Pakistani associations, there are Indian associations. They are following a colonial way of doing things: “Divide and Rule.” In the old days, suppose we had some functions. Everybody could come and invite others. All came and sat to eat together, alright. Now it is different. The Chinese Muslim Cultural and Fraternal Organization invites its members. The Indian Association invites its own members. The Pakistani Association invites its own members. The Islamic Union invites its own members.

Feeling disappointment toward the rising nationalistic spirit after World War II, Ahmed the Radical witnessed the Muslim ummah’s nationalistic spirit disintegrate due to the dividing line of nationality. Accordingly, he pointed out that there are two main forces contributing to this disunity: the colonial conspiracy of divide and rule, which seeks to weaken the social solidarity among social groups, and the Muslim leaders dominating the community’s affairs. Unlike his brother, Ahmed the Radical responded not by retreating from the dispute, but by progressing to the more radical step of participating in the community’s public affairs.

On the one hand, the experience of what he considered to be London's betrayal in denying his son's application for British citizenship drove him into a more aggressive stance on public welfare for the ethnic remnants in post-1997 Hong Kong. On the other hand, he bitterly felt the failure of local Muslim organizations to fulfill the ideal of Islam as a way of life rather than as a religion. He believes that an Islamic organization should "do something" in order to cater to the community's everyday needs, and that the ethnic Muslim minority is a community with basic needs. In this vein, service and public welfare is the frontline agenda for the community. Ahmed the Radical believes that catering to the community's everyday needs should be the core definition and imperatives of Islam:

During all of these years, the affairs of the Muslims were in the hands of the expatriate Muslims from India, okay. After the Second World War, then, you know, you see, people became more educated, and people who were ambitious, who wanted power, who wanted to control, so these groups of people tried to dominate the affairs of the community. They are still dominating the affairs of the community. They are still doing this. They are using the name of Islam. Islam is not only a religion. Islam is also a way of life. Alright, but they are not thinking what way of life; they are thinking about the religion, to make themselves popular. Now, in the way of life, for every community you need education, you need welfare, you need industries to provide jobs, to provide education, to provide welfare for the community, like old-age homes, like clinics, like medical clinics. All of these kinds of things are required. There is no point in asking a person to go and pray five times a day and to study the Qu'ran. There's no point in doing that ...

According to Ahmed the Radical, World War II engendered an ethnic or national division within the Hong Kong Muslim community. On the one hand, Indian Muslims were no longer dominant and their former power had been diffused among different ethnic or national groups. The Muslim leadership was no longer ascribed, but became socioeconomic in nature, and so factors like education became more crucial in determining the social mobility of people.

World War II also saw the beginning of sectarian interpretations among Muslim communities. From the accounts of Ahmed the Radical, the emergence of different interpretations of Islam among the different groups of Muslim community is highlighted. Clearly, Ahmed the Radical cannot view Islam exclusively as religious devotion. For him, Islam is

also a way of life and should be relevant to societal development. The community's leadership should, therefore, envision the relevance of the Islamic faith to the pace and needs of contemporary society.

*Past, Present, and Future: China Is My Neighbor,
Hong Kong Is My Home, the UAE Is My Trip*

In one television documentary series, Ahmed the Radical laments that the "Hong Kong government forgets the ethnic minorities in Hong Kong." He forcefully informs his audience that the ethnic minorities are not foreigners, but that they contribute to Hong Kong's prosperity. For him, Hong Kong is his home. He argues that the ethnic Muslim minority has long been part of Hong Kong's heritage and, therefore, should be counted as part of the Hong Kong community.

Unfortunately, the ethnic community has faced increasing social exclusion, as evidenced in the differential treatment in the educational policy directed toward ethnic children and new immigrants coming from Mainland China.⁶ For Ahmed the Radical,

... they [the ethnic minorities] are part of Hong Kong. They were born in Hong Kong; their parents have, you know, contributed to the prosperity of Hong Kong; their grandparents have contributed to the prosperity of Hong Kong; they built part of Hong Kong ... See, [the Hong Kong government] is spending so much money for people [immigrants from mainland China]. I don't mind telling you honestly, I feel very bad about this. People [men from Hong Kong] go to China, Shenzhen, [and] Canton to fool around with the women, the women get pregnant, and the children are brought here. People are brought here, and we taxpayers have to pay, right? They have not contributed anything to Hong Kong; rather, our ancestors contributed so much. I have also mentioned to you, you go to the Stanley cemetery, you go to the Chai Wan cemetery, and you see how many of those dead people who are buried there are ethnic minority. Alright, so we have contributed, we have sacrificed by trying to build Hong Kong together with the local populations. But now these people who are coming, who have never contributed, they are the ones who ran up [to China] to enjoy and got children and got more women. The government will spend so much on the children who are coming from China, getting school for them, getting everything for them. But for those who were born here, who were brought up here [...] the government doesn't care.

The disparity in social policies directed toward new immigrants from Mainland China and the ethnic community, however, does not imply an

antagonistic relationship between Ahmed the Radical and the Chinese as a whole. In fact, Ahmed the Radical treasures Hong Kong as his home, and he has been living there. In my interview with other ethnic Pakistani Muslims, Hong Kong is their home and Pakistan is their motherland. Hong Kong and Pakistan are two geographical regions, but they are also inseparably linked together.

When asking him when he will retire from his “mission,” Ahmed the Radical insists that what he is doing is still “not enough or adequate.” His restless devotion and commitment to community projects surprises many, who soon find out that he is a one-man band. His ambition for the community, however, has not diminished over the years. In recent years, he told me that he has been traveling back and forth to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) seeking transnational donations for building a new mosque in Hong Kong, due to the difficulty of getting enough funding from the local Muslim community. Currently, the UAE has pledged to give full financial support to the project.⁷ As for the question “Where is your home?” Ahmed the Radical detours his attitude to this notion by translating it into action: “There is no authentic home where there is no justice.” For Ahmed the Radical, it seems that he is still expanding his battlefield for the community.

Not Simply Revolutionary Spirit: Why He Is in the Frontier and Roars in the Society

Q: Yes, I noticed that you demonstrate against the Gulf war, and I wonder why the Wan Chai Mosque acted differently?

A: They don't do anything. They are not doing anything for the community. They are not doing anything for Islam. They are only using Islam to ... you can see whatever you want. To me, they are killing Islam in Hong Kong. They are only interested in the money of Islam. I don't mind telling you that. You can read this. They are going to set up ten million dollars for a portfolio. What is it for? Why can't it be used for welfare and education? Why is it only for administration? Management? Management of what? The portfolio?... I tell you, Mr. Ho, many people who come from abroad, the first thing they see is the big beautiful Mosque in Tsim Sha Tsui: “Muslims in Hong Kong, very pious, very good Muslims.”

As mentioned above, Ahmed the Radical's heart was torn apart because of the internal disputes and hypocrisy among the local Islamic

organizations. Thus, his warnings to and advice for them resulted in distrust and opposition. We can see a clear discrepancy in the philosophy or goals between him and the local Islamic organizations. For example, Ahmed the Radical organized a public meeting protesting the Gulf war against Iraq; however, the local Islamic organization did not show strong support for him. For Ahmed the Radical, such indifference “misuses” the name of Islam and shows that the organizations are interested only in the money of Islam. In a more provocative manner, he criticized the Islamic organizations for “killing” Islam in Hong Kong.

The Muslim ummah’s disunity has disappointed him, and so he has finally resorted to continuing his “mission” as a one-man band without any support from local Islamic organizations. This implicit denial or lack of assurance has led him to become an alternative figure in society. For Ahmed the Radical, his battlefield is twofold. As mentioned earlier, he stands in opposition to the local Muslim community. More importantly, he tries to fight for a wider recognition for the ethnic minority from mainstream Chinese society. Recently, he rallied for the needs of the elderly and ethnic children who have dropped out of school. Below, he mentions the needs of ethnic children that are being neglected by the Hong Kong government⁸:

Q: So, what is the specific need of the ethnic minorities that may not be served in a traditional Chinese school? What sort of urgent needs should be catered to?

A: I have mentioned to you also that in the old days, before 1997, when the British were here, they started to close in 1995. Before that, there were schools for the police children, alright. There are schools for the army children, okay. Because these types of soliders and policemen, most of them were Pakistani, Nepalese, or [other ethnic groups], so there were facilities for them by the police, by the army. But now these are gone, and [the government] removes all these kinds of things, completely wipe up. So where do you expect the children to go? See, they are part of Hong Kong, they were born in Hong Kong, their parents have, you know, contributed to the prosperity of Hong Kong, their grandparents also have contributed to the prosperity of Hong Kong. They built part of Hong Kong. I have heard this with my own ears, on two occasions. Tung Chee-Wah admired our community, but he is not doing anything.

Interpretations and Practicing Islam in the East and the West

Q: But you know, your brother [Ahmed the Radical] in Hong Kong, is really a provocative figure.

A: Oh, he is mad. [laughs]...

Q: Now he opened a school and an old-folks' home, and went to the UAE to get funding to build a new mosque. Did you read about it?

A: No. I didn't know of it. Good luck to him if he can do all of these things. Good luck to him. As far as I'm concerned, I just want peace and quiet. I do not have many years left. So, I want to live my life peacefully and die peacefully.

As the root coming from the same tree gives different offshoots, or as diverse manifestations have the same origin, the Ahmed brothers have their different life biographies although they shared the same childhood experience. Different life experiences show in their different interpretations of Islam and how they practice it. As illustrated above, the Ahmed brothers were similarly active in the community. They determined their own fates at the historical juncture of the end of British colonial rule in Hong Kong. Ahmed the Hermit chose to retreat into himself, seeking peace of mind and doing his amateur research and reflecting on the Islamic faith in Britain. Ahmed the Radical, on the other hand, deployed himself in the frontline of a new fault-line: combating the rise of Chinese nationalism for the welfare of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong.

*Ahmed the Hermit: Not Islam versus the West,
But "The Western people practice Islam."*

Perhaps the most provocative argument given by Ahmed the Hermit is that western modernity is not antithetical to Islam. He does not find the central values of Islam and western life incompatible. Also, one could not find any ground for the claims like "Islam versus the West" or "tradition versus modernity" in his narrative. For Ahmed the Hermit, the West actualizes the spirit of Islam, for the "West practises Islam." When he narrates the death of his mother and the hospital service, it is con-

tentious for him to claim that he found “Islam” in Britain but not in Muslim countries:

I know my mother died in one of those places. And then I also know that at that time there was no Muslim old ladies home. One thing is very funny, I learned and noticed [that] in all the Muslim countries, they talk about the Qur’an, they preach the Qur’an, they preach the Hadith, they preach the Sunnah, but they don’t practice it. In this western country, they don’t preach the Qur’an, they don’t tell you anything about the Hadith, but they practice Islam. They practice Islam. Why do I say they practice Islam? You see they have hospitals, they have old-age pensions. You see, that is what Islam does.

Q: What makes you see this difference? The West practices Islam? ... because ...

A: Because you can see it. Why do they practice Islam? I’ll tell you why. They have old-age pensions, nobody is poor, nobody begs in the street. They got their hospitals for free and look after you until the day you die. You have this old age pension home, which the government provides. And this is all in the Qur’an! But you don’t see such things in Pakistan, in India, in Iraq, in Iran. You don’t see these kinds of things. Because [when] you have no money, you can’t see the doctor. If you have no money, you have no food.

One may not agree with Ahmed the Hermit’s definition of Islam. Clearly, he appreciates very much the hospital care, elderly services, and other social services that are available in Britain, which he could not find in Muslim countries. In this sense, he contends that if the true Islamic practices and the central values of Islam were taking care of the elderly and the poor and providing medical care, then the West is practicing Islam more than the Muslim countries.

Though one can refute and ignore this kind of provocative claim, it should not be taken as an indication of disrespect, for Ahmed the Hermit argues that he could not find any Islamic regimes that provide shelter, medical care, and provision for the elderly like he experienced in Britain. Of course, one can argue that Ahmed the Hermit neglects the social problems in the West. Thus, one can argue that the global order, in which scholars argue that the Islamic regimes deprive their people of many benefits and services, is not inherent in nature but should be comprehended in terms of the colonial hegemony, where the West exploits the Third World and Asia as a whole.

*Ahmed the Radical: Chinese Do Not Hate Islam,
But “are ignorant of Islam”*

For Ahmed the Radical, the ethnic Muslim community is a deprived population in the postcolonial era. He laments its poor and unfair situation when compared with the colonial era. For instance, the resistance of local Chinese residents to establishing a mosque in the New Territories expresses the tip of the iceberg of the marginality experienced by local ethnic Muslims.

In general, the ethnic Muslim minority suffers from isolation and the implicit sentiment of racism in searching for jobs and education. Many children from South Asia have difficulty in gaining admission to schools. They drop out of school due to the adaptive problems of learning the native language (Cantonese) and adapting to the local curriculum and Chinese peer culture. An increasing number of mobile populations, such as Indonesian domestic helpers, also are living in an unfavorable environment, especially since the Asian economic crisis that took place after the handover of Hong Kong in 1997. Indonesian domestic workers were the first scapegoats to taste frozen wages and layoffs. After September 11, non-Chinese, ethnic Muslims became conspicuous targets of discrimination because of the label “Islam” and their skin color.⁹

It should be noted that Ahmed the Radical is not antagonistic to the Chinese people in Hong Kong. He only blames their ignorance, for they know too little about Islam as a peaceful religion. For him, the target or the obstacles to his programs are his brothers in Islam: the Chinese Muslims. To ethnic Muslims, they are strangers living on the fringes of a cosmopolitan city. In contrast to the ethnic Muslims, many Chinese Muslims are the silent minority in that they seem to be an invisible part of society. Their Muslim identity is hardly visible in public life. Being familiar with the local Chinese culture and language of the mainstream society, Chinese Muslims, in general, have no difficulty in assimilating into the society. However, few of them explicitly retain their Muslim identity in everyday life. Ahmed the Radical observes that some Chinese Muslims “forget” Islam or integrate too comfortably into the western lifestyle.

*One Common Root But Two Different Branches:
Diverse Social Life in the Two Host Societies*

Ahmed the Hermit ridicules his younger brother’s “overdone” work, calling it “mad.” The reason for this is their different definitions of Islamic practice and perceptions toward their respective host societies.

They have different interpretations of Islamic practice in two different non-Muslim regimes. Nonetheless, this article does not intend to compare which practice is “better,” “Islamic,” or “orthodox,” for it seems to me that they are incommensurable to each other, depending on which school of Islamic thought one stands to adjudicate. Nevertheless, the above arguments and analytical categorizations do try to raise the need to rethink Muslim minorities living in the East and the West. Thus, I have shown the variations of life experience with diverse interpretations of Islamic practice and different attitudes toward non-Muslim societies.

Conclusion: Unique Features and Implications of the Southeast Asia Muslim Diaspora

To conclude, four arguments were made throughout the article. Each one may shed some light and provide distinctive perspectives for studying the Southeast Asian Muslim diaspora in the future.

Argument 1: Ports in Southeast Asia: From Trade Link to Military Site; From the Flow of Goods to the Flow of Muslims. Through the migration story of my respondents’ family, this article suggests that the expansion of the colonial empire led to another form of Southeast Asian Muslim diaspora. The domination of the western colonial powers also implicates the rise of a new maritime power in the world, that is, the maritime naval powers from Europe, India, Persia, and the Arab world.¹⁰ As I argued in the second section, I demonstrated with my informants’ family story that the movement of people from South Asia to China was due to British colonial rule. In this sense, the thrust of the Southeast Asian Muslim diaspora during the western colonial era was no longer purely due to maritime commercial interactions. However, the colonial powers did intrude by bringing Muslims to meet their colonial deployment in Asia. This brings our focus to the new mode of the Muslim diaspora in Southeast Asia.

I argued that the transnational move of this particular family (viz., my two informants) is no longer due exclusively to the trade and business link, as perceived by the movement of Southeast Asian Muslims in the precolonial period. Rather, this article argues that the existing force of migration driven by the colonial empire and postcolonial change is largely ignored. Also presented is the role of ports as significant business entrepôts that became more important military sites for colonial powers due to their status as a point of entry. The flow of business goods and the flow of Muslims are inseparable processes in this context, and therefore, researchers study-

ing the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia cannot overlook maritime history. Nevertheless, the data given in this article present the movement of Muslims in the nineteenth century as being accelerated by the colonial movement, because the British colonial empire brought in the Muslims to defend the empire's interests in the Far East.

Argument 2: Beyond Military Confrontation and Cultural Invasion: Implications of Mercantile Influence. In terms of the spread of Islam, this article presents the remarkable transmission of the Islamic faith in Southeast Asian Muslims historically. Maritime Islamic movement in the precolonial Nanyang is free of external coercion from the West. That is to say, the maritime trade and people's interaction in *Nanyang* was relatively autonomous within the region of the South Seas. Only with the rise of western colonial power from the sixteenth century onward was the Southeast Asian Muslim diaspora heavily manipulated by the colonial powers. Inevitably, this development involved exploitative relations in both national treaties and in global labor relations, in which the migrants found unfavorable working conditions.

The maritime spread of Islam brings us to the second dimension of implication. Metaphorically speaking, the presence of Muslims in China and Southeast Asia, due to the circumstances of maritime history, is analogous to the long-term effect of water penetrating a hard stone. Though it is as light and as weak as water, it breaks the hard stone as time goes by. In other words, the mercantile encounters that took place throughout history make the spread of Muslims and Islam, both as a religion and as a way of life, less bloody, less threatening, and less confrontational. However, it also took much longer, when compared with the military conquest over a short period of time for a large-scale conversion. In this sense, the growth of Islam is less significant and the presence of Muslims is less prominent in the political and the public spheres. Most importantly, it explains the low profile of this Muslim community in the public sphere and their lower level of ambition in political life, for they are hardly singled out by their Muslim identity from the everyday life of mainstream society.

Argument 3: Between Solitary and Radical Imagination: The Ambivalence of Southeast Asian Muslim Diaspora in the Postcolonial Era. This article further contends that the transnational Islamic movement cannot be fully explained if its participants' personal narratives and individual strategies are not explained by diverse theological orientations and life encounters. In the

case study in this article, the decision of either returning to a solitary “hermit” or becoming a “roaring radical” will decide one’s decision to stay or leave the homeland, even in the presence of a shared bloodline and cultural heritage. This differs from such massively destructive events like war, ethnic cleansing, or famine. In this particular case study, the Southeast Asian Muslims have enjoyed a flexible citizenship.” However, even though they survived, they have been relegated to living on the margins of society.

Finally, this article suggests that the Southeast Asian Muslims are neither passive consumers nor blind followers of mainstream Arab Islamic culture. The stories in this article reveal an independent Islamic culture, one that is rarely placed in the dominant position in mainstream Islamic expression. To conclude, the history and story of the Southeast Asian Muslim diaspora and its members’ distinctive understanding of Islam in everyday life in their various non-Muslim host polities has made its own unique contribution to the Muslim world.

Argument 4: Beyond the Antithetical Relationship between the East and the West. Finally, this article tries to rethink the current situation of Muslim minorities in the East and the West. Although it could not provide a generalized picture, the claims made by my informants that the West practices Islam, and the lack of solidarity between ethnic and Chinese Muslims do draw our attention to further research on Southeast Asian Muslim minorities. They neither show extreme antagonism toward the host society nor any close linkage and affection with the majority Muslim community (South Asian Muslims in Britain, as well as Chinese Muslims in Hong Kong). In fact, Ahmed the Hermit, who lives in Britain, appreciates the local British culture and people more than Muslim polities. Ahmed the Radical, who continues to live in Hong Kong, is disappointed with the present Chinese-dominated policy and thus has become nostalgic about the “good old days” of British colonial rule. He is also critical of the local Chinese Muslims in postcolonial Hong Kong.

Throughout the analysis, this article explored the attitude of non-Muslim polities and showed that neither of my informants have displayed any extreme anti-western sentiment throughout the colonial and the post-colonial eras. Their ambivalent attitudes toward the East and the West goes beyond the antithetical stereotype between Islam and the West. Hopefully, this article has provided an alternative angle through which to rethink the dominant media discourse or the situation of Muslims living in non-Muslim polities.

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Notes

1. Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 179.
2. Wang Gungwu, *Don't Leave Home: Migration and the Chinese* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2001), 98-299.
3. In order to justify using the methodology of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory of narrative to conduct my research, I outline and summarize his hermeneutical stance in brief. Please see Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," *Social Research* 38, no. 3, (Autumn 1971): 529-62; Paul Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 101-28; Paul Ricoeur, "Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator," in *Facts and Values: Philosophical Reflections from Western and Non-Western Perspectives*, eds. M. C. Doezer and J. N Kraay (Dordrecht: Martin Nihoff, 1987), 121-32; Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Identity," *Philosophy Today* (spring 1991): 73-81; Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992); and Paul Ricoeur "The Self as an Other," *Philosophy Today* (spring 1993): 3-22. First of all, Ricoeur contends that life as a story presupposes "the interconnectedness of life" (the notion proposed by Dilthey). In this sense, I will justify that a person's life is a narrative unity. The self faces the dimension of the future under the hermeneutical mode of "hope." In this sense, one's selfhood assumes an "active agency," hoping actively to shape events in accordance with possibility. Also, one's self recalls the dimension of the past under the hermeneutical mode of "memory." In this sense, the interpretation of one's narrative presupposes the "temporal whole of memories and possibilities of [the] future." Hence, the notion of one's self

as a narrative text embodying a narrative plot links the personal memory of the past and the hope of one's future. Ricoeur proposes that in order to understand the stories of "the Other," the researcher needs to make a "detour" through the literary forms of narrative and, more precisely, through fictional narratives. This "detour" refers to listening attentively to and appreciating my respondents, the "otherness" of whom may be discerned in written texts. Then the researcher, assuming the constancy of the respondents, considers the narrative as justifiable and constructs the "durable character of an individual," which places the respondents' narrative identity within a coherent narrative plot. The researcher systematizes one's life narrative as a plot, a life that can be told as a story. In the plot, the narrator must make every effort to mediate between permanence and change, concordance and discordance. A story is, then, not just a contingent assemblage of actions and events; rather, it involves their intended synthesis by way of "emplotment." Actions and events connected by this emplotment undergo a "configuration" of concordances and discordance. Finally, the person's "character" will emerge from this constant mediation. In Ricoeur's terms, the story is narrated through "the interconnection of events constituted by emplotment," in which permanence in time is allowed to be integrated with "diversity, variability, discontinuity, and instability." Thus, the interconnectedness of narrated actions and events can be transferred into the character of the person being narrated. Also see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 47-48. To sum up, my respondents' lives were then systematized and framed into different plots and characters.

4. The interview excerpt is extracted from Ho Wai-Yip, "A Historical Analysis of Islamic Community Development in Hong Kong: Struggle for Recognition in the Post-Colonial Era," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 21, no. 1 (April 2001): 64.
5. Chang David Wen-wei and Richard Y. Chuang, *The Politics of Hong Kong's Reversion to China* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 56-57.
6. Ho Wai-Yip, "A Historical Analysis," 74.
7. Ho Wai-Yip, "Contested Mosques in Hong Kong" *ISIM Newsletter* 10 (July 2002): 14. This newsletter is published by the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, Leiden, The Netherlands.
8. Ho Wai-Yip, "A Historical Analysis," 72.
9. Ho Wai-Yip, "Contested Mosques in Hong Kong," 14.
10. Wang Gungwu, *The Chinese Overseas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 30.