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East Asia

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Contested Mosques in Hong Kong

Global attention was given to the macro-political changes of Hong Kong in 1997, namely the transition of sovereignty from British colonial rule to the rule of the socialist regime of the People's Republic of China (PRC). But the micro-history of ethnic minorities has been often neglected, if not suppressed. The history of the Muslim ethnic minorities in Hong Kong under British colonial rule and the Chinese-dominated government can be revealed vividly through the design and the spatial distribution of mosques throughout Hong Kong's history. The history of ethnic Muslims is intertwined with that of the mosques in which they gathered. Mosques were – and still are – perceived as sites of cultural and political contestation.

UMAH, 1999

A proposed mosque and Islamic centre of the United Muslim Association of HongKong.

The history of ethnic Muslims in the colonial era is inseparable from the British colonial policies. According to a recent government report in 2002, there are some 80,000 Muslims in Hong Kong. Approximately half of the Muslims in Hong Kong today are of Chinese origin; the others belong to various smaller ethnic groups, including local born non-Chinese believers from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Middle East and various African countries. The recent increase in the Muslim population may be attributed to mobile populations such as the influx of Indonesian domestic helpers. The first Muslims to settle in Hong Kong were of Indian origin. From the mid-19th century onward, Muslim soldiers and businessmen from the Indian sub-continent arrived in Hong Kong. As Muslims increased in number, the colonial government allocated land to them to build community facilities such as mosques and cemeteries.

The politics of space

The Jamiathe Masjid was the first mosque in Hong Kong, built in 1890. After this mosque was demolished, the building was reconstructed as the Shelly Street Mosque, dating from 1915. In terms of religious and cultural rights, the British government's recognition of the needs of Muslims, which resulted in aid being given to them so that they could build a community distinctive from local Chinese culture, was an important step. Nowadays, the Shelly Street Mosque is listed as part of the historical heritage of the city and has been recently renovated. As urban reconstruction programmes and estate developers target the site for potential redevelopment, the mosque escapes extinction under the government policy. The present status of the mosque is no longer strategic when compared to the past. Indeed, it signifies the identity crisis of ethnic Muslims in the post-colonial era. Many non-Chinese Muslims are no longer well off or privileged under the new regime in the post-colonial era as compared to the past. They are forced to scatter in the New Territories driven by the government's urban renewal policy.

Other mosques are in threat of destruction. The Stanley Mosque and the Cape Collinson Mosque (in Chai Wan) are situated in two remote places on Hong Kong Island and are interestingly both built in isolated prison areas (Stanley Prison and Cape Collinson Correctional Institution). Originally built in the early 20th century to serve for prayer and congregation purposes for the Indian Muslim prison staff, the later tremendous drop of Muslim staff in these two prisons and the low access following its isolated location from the residential area have led to the preservation of the two mosques being questioned. Although the prison and the correctional institution are still in service, there has been a significant decrease in the number of Indian Muslim staff members at both. In a recent initiative the government proposed to demolish or convert the Stanley Mosque into a club for government officials.

Mosque design in divide

Another mosque on Hong Kong Island exhibits the cultural divergence between ethnic and local culture: the Masjid Amar and Osman Ramju Sadick Islamic Centre (Wan Chai Mosque), opened in 1967. This mosque, designed by Ramju Sadick, a Chinese Muslim, demonstrates a distinctive Chinese cultural tradition. The Wan Chai Mosque particularly attracts Chinese Muslims, as compared with, for example, the Kowloon Mosque and Islamic Centre, which attracts Muslims from various ethnic backgrounds. The internal design of both mosques embodies various ethnic traditions. The Wan Chai Mosque fits more smoothly in the general organizational structure of Hong Kong, serving multi-faceted purposes. The eight-floor complex is composed of a prayer hall, a Chinese restaurant, a *halal* bakery, medical services, a library and seminar rooms. The Islamic Union of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Islamic Youth Association are based in the Wan Chai Mosque Centre.

The Kowloon Mosque, constructed in 1896, remained a place of worship for over 80 years until extensive damage was caused by the urban Mass Transit Railway project. The mosque was reconstructed and reopened in 1984 in the Tsim Shau Tsui area as a place for prayer and learning. It is primarily frequented by Muslims who have their roots in the Indian Subcontinent, many of them living in the nearby Chung Ching Mansion, where ethnic minorities have settled. This also explains why the Kowloon Mosque also plays a role as a cultural site for non-Chinese Muslims, who assemble there for their social life and support, exchange of information, and leisure. Non-Chinese and Chinese Muslims live in different segments of society, with different cultural orientations and lifestyles, though they adhere to the universal *umma*.

The Wan Chai Mosque has a multi-purpose design and clearly caters to the local Chinese mentality. Its multi-purpose design differs from that of the Kowloon Mosque, where the space is mainly devoted to the three prayer halls with luxurious white marble finishing. Moreover, the leaders of the respective Muslim communities in these two mosques also distinctively differ in terms of their ethnic backgrounds: a Chinese imam from China proper leads the Muslim community at the Wan Chai Mosque, whereas a non-Chinese imam leads the Kowloon Mosque. Chinese Muslims gather in the Chinese restaurant of the Wan Chai Mosque, where they can comfortably enjoy social time and have a Chinese *halal* meal. Different cultural practices and the institutional design of the mosques, on one hand, reflect the availability of a variety of spaces to accommodate ethnic differences; but, on the other hand, there has yet to be developed a stronger solidarity, one which goes beyond ethnic difference, amongst all Hong Kong Muslims.

Spatial distribution and design

The social and cultural status of non-Chinese Muslims in post-colonial Hong Kong can also be examined through the ongoing project of the sixth mosque in Hong Kong, the Sheung Shui Mosque and Islamic Centre. The construction of this mosque is pathbreaking as it is the first mosque to be built in the post-colonial New Territories. Urban reconstruction forces many Muslims to move from Hong Kong Island to the new satellite cities in the New Territories. Many of these Muslims are economically less well off and have no alternative but to comply with government policies. In view of the absence of facilities in the New Territories, Muslim leaders campaigned for mosques and community facilities. Limited land supply as well as the government's policy to promote social welfare influenced the negotiations; the latest revision of the design aims at the development of a welfare-oriented mosque, which will not only include a prayer hall but also an English-medium secondary school and facilities for the elderly. Permission to build the Sheung Shui Mosque and Islamic Centre has been granted and Muslim countries including the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have pledged to give full financial support, but resistance continues. Local Chinese residents express their discontent with the plans for the mosque, arguing that it may upset social order. The non-Chinese Muslim leader interprets the opposition of Chinese residents to the mosque project as being the result of ignorance with respect to Islam and discrimination towards non-Chinese Muslims. A dialogue has been initiated between ethnic (non-Chinese) Muslim leaders and local Hong Kong Chinese representatives. The yearning for public acceptance of the new mosque in the New Territories indeed symbolizes the road ahead of social recognition among non-Chinese Muslims.

One *umma*, two fates

Non-Chinese Muslims are a deprived population in the post-colonial era, and their leaders lament the situation they deem unjust as compared with that of the colonial era. Resistance of Chinese residents against the mosque in the New Territories expresses just the tip of the iceberg of the marginality of non-Chinese Muslims. In general, the non-Chinese Muslim minority suffers from the isolation and implicit racism in searching for employment and in education. Many children from South Asian countries have difficulties being admitted to schools. They drop out from school due to problems with learning the native Chinese (Cantonese) language, adapting to the curriculum and the Chinese culture of their peers. The increase in mobile groups such as Indonesian domestic helpers find themselves in an unfavourable environment, especially after the Asian economic crisis following the handover of Hong Kong in 1997. Indonesian domestic workers were the first to experience frozen wages and layoffs. After 11 September, non-Chinese Muslims have become conspicuous targets of discrimination due to the label of 'Islam' and their skin colour. In contrast, in the eyes of the non-Chinese Muslim, Chinese Muslims are a silent minority that seems to be invisible in society. Their Muslim identity is hardly noticeable in public life. At home with the local Chinese culture and language, Chinese Muslims generally have no difficulty functioning in society. Few of them outwardly express their Muslim identity in everyday life. A non-Chinese Muslim leader observed that many Chinese Muslims 'forget' Islam or integrate too comfortably in the 'westernized' lifestyle. As Hong Kong has transitioned from the colonial to post-colonial era, mosques have reflected changes, especially in terms of the social and political status of Muslims. Only time will tell what will become of the current clear divide between Chinese and non-Chinese Muslims in Hong Kong, and how they will come to terms with the notion of the *umma*.

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