

**DEVELOPMENT AND DECLINE OF BEIJING'S
HUI MUSLIM COMMUNITY**

ZHOU CHUANBIN AND MA XUEFENG

**ASIAN MUSLIM ACTION NETWORK
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FOREWORD

Problematizing views from within "Islam(s)" in Southeast Asia

In 1953 the late Gustav von Grunebaum organized a conference of leading European scholars of Islam, the first to undertake a historical and critical self-understanding of "Islamic studies." The conference examined relationships among Muslims, and between Islam and various cultures. It found that the assumptions and methods used in fields of study like Islamic history lagged a century behind those used in European history. One year later Bernard Lewis remarked that the history of the Arabs had been written primarily in Europe by historians with no knowledge of Arabic and Arabists with no knowledge of history.¹

Half a century later, research on the subject has changed. There is an increasing number of studies on Islam written by Muslims who know the faith, the cultures, and the practices in different contexts—the works by Akbar Ahmad, Mahmoud Mumtaz, Chandra Muzaffar, and Nurcholish Madjid are just a few examples among many. Also changed is the global context itself. Now perhaps more than ever, "Islam" is more than just a description of a fifteen-century-old faith shared by one-and-a-half billion people. The word has strong emotive qualities for those both within and outside the faith. Two decades ago the late Edward Said wrote, "For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the center, a kind of distasteful exoticism. In all camps, however, there is agreement that even though little enough is known about the Islamic world there is not much to be approved of there."² It is therefore important to understand, from their own perspectives, the contemporary problems that Muslims are facing.

Works in this series, *Islam in Southeast Asia: Views from Within*, join many other writings on Islam by authors at the periphery of scholarship, using assumptions and methods that may no longer differ from those

used in the centers of learning. But if such is the case, how is this series different from the other writings on Islam that are presently flooding the popular and academic landscapes?

To state the obvious, this series addresses Islam in Southeast Asia. In relation to the Islamic world, where the sacred geography, history, and language of the Middle East seems to have established that region as the center, Southeast Asia is clearly seen as the periphery. But it is misleading to conceptualize Southeast Asia as a single sociocultural entity. As is true elsewhere in the world, societies in Southeast Asia are heterogeneous. Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, lead lives that differ from those in Thailand and the Philippines because of the different realities facing majority and minority populations in the respective countries. Furthermore, whether Muslims constitute a minority or a majority, their lives differ again when seen in contexts influenced by Javanese culture, British colonialism, Filipino Catholicism, or Theravada Buddhism, among other things. In short, the cultural topography of Southeast Asia is a rich multiplicity.

Consequently, Islam as believed in and practiced by people in the diverse worlds of Southeast Asia is not necessarily singular, since there could be as many Islams as the various contexts that constitute them.³ The problems facing Muslims in Southeast Asia will therefore vary. Those portrayed by researchers in this series are unusual, and their analysis is at times groundbreaking, but what they underscore is that Southeast Asian Muslims struggle with multiple identities in sociocultural contexts destabilized by globalizing forces. In addition, the fact that this research is carried out by young Muslim scholars is important; the "new generation" factor could explain both the distinctive set of problems these researchers are interested in and the fresh approaches they use.

The "views from within" approach, however, is not without its own potential problems. To engage in studies claiming to be "views from within" is in some ways to guard against the study of "others" as the study of one's own self, because in such a situation writers face other types of realities that are possibly distorted in some other ways. It is therefore important

for readers to appreciate the effort researchers make to situate themselves at a distance that gives them a better perspective on the social realities of their subject while retaining their sensitivity towards, and ability to relate to, the people they are studying.⁴

At a time when Islamophobia is on the rise,⁵ it is essential to find fresh perspectives that will allow us to understand the new problems and tensions facing Muslims in contemporary Southeast Asian societies, and to articulate the ways in which they negotiate their lives as members of communities of faith in a fast-changing world. This series of studies by young Muslim scholars of Southeast Asia is an important step in this direction.

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Notes

1. Azim Nanji, ed., *Mapping Islamic Studies: Genealogy, Continuity and Change* (Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997), xii.
2. Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), xv.
3. Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London and New York: Verso, 1996).
4. I have discussed the problem of alterity in conducting research on Muslim studies in Chaiwat Satha-Anand, *The Life to this World: Negotiated Muslim Lives in Thai Society* (Singapore and New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2005), 25–26.
5. Akbar S. Ahmad, *Islam under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 36–39.

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Development and Decline of BEIJING'S HUI MUSLIM COMMUNITY

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Hui Muslims in China have lived with the Han Chinese for hundreds of years, maintaining their Islamic and cultural identity despite the powerful assimilation mechanisms of Chinese society. Today, however, the urban Hui community is confronted with new pressures. This monograph examines the traditional social structure and kinship network of urban Hui Muslims that historically allowed them to defend ethnic and religious boundaries. The study further explores the social transitions and challenges caused by revolution, modernization, urbanization, and globalization that presently threaten the cultural survival of the Hui Muslim community in Beijing.

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