Making ‘new’ Muslim places in urban Malaysia and Indonesia

My research in 2013 brought me to various cities in Malaysia and Indonesia. It gave me the opportunity to visit a multitude of interesting venues, ranging from sacred places (Chinese-style mosques), to eating places (Chinese halal restaurants), retail places (shopping malls and Islamic boutiques) and living places (Muslim gated communities), and led me to develop a new research project in which I will study Muslim identities and aspirations in contemporary societies, by examining the construction of places, aspirations on space and the architecture of built forms.

By studying the production and consumption of ‘new’ Muslim places, this research aims to provide fresh ways of thinking about Islam, and more specifically, of thinking about Muslims and their relations to the challenges of urbanisation, modernity and nationality in contemporary Malaysia and Indonesia. It will examine how and under what conditions, religious movements transform urbanity and, vice versa, how urban space triggers religious innovations. Yet, it does not see Islam as the only parameter to understand such dynamics, but also takes other aspects into consideration such as consumer culture, ethnic interaction, political contestation and economic development.

While this research engages with both current scholarly debates about the relationship between space and place, it highlights the material dimensions of spatial formation, by looking at places such as Chinese-style mosques, halal restaurants, Muslim gated communities and Muslim websites. Although they do not have a physical structure, online spaces entail material sensibilities represented by words and images. Instead of conventional Muslim places, such as mosques (in this case, non-Chinese style), religious schools and shrines, this study emphasises the development of new practices and the formation of new ideas, as reflected in the making of new places I describe below.

Promoting inclusive Islam: Chinese-style mosques

This project builds upon my ongoing work on ‘Translocal and Cosmopolitan Islam: Chinese-style Mosques in Malaysia and Indonesia’. Since 2000, at least ten Chinese-style mosques were built in Malaysia and Indonesia, clearly making them a translocal phenomenon. Inspired by the architectural design of old mosques in mainland China, different actors have built Chinese-style mosques in various cities in both Malaysia and Indonesia to preach the universality of Islam, as well as to show the compatibility between Islam and Chineseness.

Yet there are also different motivations behind the construction of each mosque. For instance, the Kelantan Beijing Mosque was sponsored by an Islamic party in Malaysia to promote an inclusive image of the party, while the Surabaya Cheng Hoo Mosque was established by the Indonesian Chinese Muslim Association to manifest a distinctive representation of Chinese Muslim cultural identity. In addition, the activities in the mosques are localised: the sermons are conducted in Malay or Indonesian, and most of the congregation members are non-Chinese Muslims. These mosques have also been promoted as sites for religious tourism and symbols of religious inclusivity.

Culinary Dakwah: Chinese halal restaurants

The research will be extended to include places such as Chinese halal restaurants and Muslim gated communities. In the last ten years, the number of Chinese halal restaurants in Malaysia has mushroomed. Such restaurants attract many Malay Muslim middle-class clients in urban Malaysia. Chinese converted to Islam are key players in Chinese halal restaurants and Muslim gated communities. The research will be extended to include places such as Chinese halal restaurants and Muslim gated communities. Then, they are not only religious, but also economic. They are part of the transformation of Chinese converts, especially in the cities. The research will be extended to include places such as Chinese halal restaurants and Muslim gated communities. Then, they are not only religious, but also economic. They are part of the transformation of Chinese converts, especially in the cities.