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Chapter

Masjid Kowloon: A Case Study of Coexistence Culture in Hong Kong

Jacky Chun-Leung Li and Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor

Abstract

Hong Kong is an international city, located in Southern China. It used to be a British colony before 1997. While the British arrived in Hong Kong and developed it as an important seaport in the far East, Islam was believed to have spread in Hong Kong with the arrival of South Asian sailors and soldiers. Islam is not a strange religion to the Hong Kong people; it can be seen in their daily life. In Hong Kong, every people enjoys the right to practice their religion in daily life. However, due to the population structure and cultural homogeneity, people are not really familiar with Islam. Due to the negative footage in the past and an inadequate understanding of Islam, non-Muslims in Hong Kong misunderstood Muslims and caused unnecessary conflicts. The chapter aims to analyze the role of Masjid Kowloon in maintaining religious function and promoting social harmony. The chapter will use historical analysis and textual analysis to show that coexistence culture is possible in the real world, together with the analysis of prerequisites to achieving a harmonic coexistence culture in society.

Keywords: multiculturalism, Islam, Hong Kong, Masjid Kowloon, social diversities

1. Introduction

Hong Kong is an international business city and is located in Southern China. At first, Hong Kong used to be a famous strategic port before its opening in 1840, which can be found in history books since the Tang dynasty, but it was not called Hong Kong, rather it used the local town names. Hong Kong was first used as a formal name after the arrival of the British.

Following the Opium War, Hong Kong became a British colony, and later Kowloon, new territories were added to the ruling area of the British colony, which was based on Hong Kong island. This is the current definition of Hong Kong.

This chapter aims to analyze the role of Masjid Kowloon in maintaining religious function and promoting social harmony as a case study of multiculturalism. This chapter will also give the prerequisites to achieving a diversified culture in a city or country. For a long time, Masjid Kowloon has been regarded as a symbol of multiculturalism in Hong Kong, because Muslims are the minority and the religious practices largely differ from those of the local Hong Kong people.

2. Research methodology and literature reviews

The chapter will first discuss the meaning of multiculturalism and then provide the opinions of some important philosophers on multiculturalism. Then, it will use historical analysis and textual analysis to trace the history of Islam in Hong Kong and the construction of Masjid Kowloon. It will be discussed with some examples of the role of religious activities and social connection. In the process of discussion, it can be seen how Masjid Kowloon tries to interact with Hong Kong society, and how the Hong Kong people accept its existence and tolerate it in the real world.

Paul O'Connor is probably the most famous scholar to write a book about Islam in Hong Kong. This book was published by the University of Hong Kong. The book is written in a thematic style, the author chose some important topics about Islam in Hong Kong, such as Oi Kwan Road (Masjid Wan Chai), Chungking Mansion, religious practices, Islamic cuisine in Hong Kong, and cultural identity in Hong Kong. The author wanted to emphasize that Muslims in Hong Kong face not only religious and customary distinctions with non-Muslims, but also invisible discriminations that we cannot detect in our daily life unless we have a thorough understanding of Islam or minorities.

Yang Xingben (楊興本) or Imam Uthman Yang wrote a book called “Understanding Islam” (了解伊斯蘭/Taarif Al-Islam), which is a Chinese book about Islam in Hong Kong. Uthman Yang is a well-known iman in Hong Kong and is sometimes interviewed by the news and social media. It briefly introduces the rise of Islam and its spread in Hong Kong, the religious concepts of Islam, and the Islamic culture in Hong Kong, including Islamic food, clothing, seni visual, calligraphy, and science.

3. Multiculturalism and its prerequisites

So, what is multiculturalism? Why is it very important to our society? Can we say that the emergence of multiculturalism is to guarantee social equality for different races? Multiculturalism is a new idea that emerged after the two world wars, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. Humans witnessed the catastrophic wars and negative impacts of autocratic rules, so they started to wonder if it was possible to construct a barrier-free society.

Some famous scholars, such as Vernon Van Dyke, Will Kymlicka, Joseph Raz, Charles Taylor, Avashai Margalit, and Iris Marion Young, suggested and interpreted the theory of multiculturalism respectively in the twentieth century. They are based on the importance of individualism, freedom of society, interaction among humans, cultural equality, and autonomy [1]. In sum, the existence of multiculturalism is based on the struggle for liberalism and the identification of group-differentiated rights, which purpose is to make life better [2].

It is impossible to see cultural homogeneity in a normal society because humans are highly mobile genesis in the world. Humans want to get a better life for their family or the next generations and thus move to other places. Historically, every civilization was also built with this important social feature—high population mobility and then the formation of multiculturalism.

If nondominant groups want to stay in society, one of the important things is to gain social recognition (and even tolerance and acceptance) in this society, at least they can obtain political approval to continue their personal life in this society.

As Charles Taylor in his chapter said, this kind of ethnic recognition consists of the demand for dignity and honor among the specific group in society. The minority

usually spends a long time struggling for the right of abode, which is a type of political recognition of the emergence of multiculturalism—this consists of the consideration of morality during the process of decision-making [3].

So, multiculturalism is not only a term for people to practice in daily life, like mutual respect and appreciation. The emergence of multiculturalism in society must have experienced mutual suspension and understanding, which consists of political and economic distribution, and then developed into a unique cultural landscape in a society, together with the guarantee of the constitution.

However, it is questionable whether people will follow this social value, as the guarantee of the constitution is a different matter from the practice in daily life and teaching in schools. In this case, some famous philosophers in Europe, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Montesquieu, tried to explore how people live with dignity and honor in the real world as they wanted to break through the hierarchical society [4] and then developed famous political theories that are still being practiced in the modern world, especially in democratic countries like the West. Continuous change in society is an eternal existence in our world.

Thus, a society characterized by mature ethnic understanding and all-time-ready tolerance is indispensable in achieving multiculturalism in the real world. Meanwhile, the minority should be sure to get their own identity and survive in the living place. This “identity” includes ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and sexuality without confusion [5]. At least the society is well-prepared for the arrival and tolerance of nonlocal residents and tourists. In the economic aspect, a tolerant and diverse society can attract tourists and investors, which can help boost the economy.

4. Islam in Hong Kong

In fact, Masjid Kowloon is not the first mosque in Hong Kong, Paul O'Connor in his book said that Jamia Mosque (or Shelley Street Mosque, Jamia means the Muslims congregate to pray, the name is the same word and meaning as Jamek Mosque in Kuala Lumpur) was the first mosque in Hong Kong [6], but the government document showed that the first mosque was not Jamia Mosque. The first mosque was built in 1849, just 9 years after Hong Kong Island became a British colony. A designated area (at upper and lower Lascar Row in Sheung Wan, Lascar is Laskar in Urdu and Askar in Arabic, which means soldier) [7] was leased for the Indian Muslims to perform Friday prayers.

Due to the increasing number of Muslims, they needed to find a suitable and comfortable place for Muslims to perform Friday prayers. Then, the Jamie Mosque was built in 1890. In other words, the construction of Jamie Mosque on Shelley Street witnessed the spread of Islam in Hong Kong and the early arrival of Indian Muslims.

Additionally, the theory of explaining the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia could to some extent also be applied to the arrival of Islam in Hong Kong. Traditionally, the scholars will suggest Arabia, India, China, and Champa [8, 9], which are quite popular in history textbooks in Malaysia and Indonesia. This is because the trading routes of Arabs and Persians are usually located in these areas. Similar routes were taken by the Europeans after the rise of colonial powers in the eighteenth century.

However, the differences between Hong Kong and the Malay archipelago are: the local Hong Kong culture is a dominant stream and thus difficult to Islamize, but the Malay archipelago is a maritime civilization and thus easily accepts Islamization. Anyway, the theory of explaining the spread of Islam in the Malay archipelago is still a referable one to explain the arrival of Islam in Hong Kong.

According to the research done by Clara Chan, who is a graduate student at the University of Hong Kong, she traced the arrival of Muslims in the past half-century. At first, the Muslims mainly came from Pakistan and India due to British rule [10]. At the same time, the Civil War in China also brought some Chinese Muslims to Hong Kong, most of them were Hui people from Guangxi, Yunnan, or Shanghai [11]. Pamela Peck Wan Kam is one of the famous Hui people in Hong Kong. She is the descendant of the Hui people who fled to Hong Kong after the outbreak of the Civil War in 1945–1949—a distant relative of General Omar Bai Chong-xi in Taiwan.

With improving transportation, the Muslims were not only from Pakistan and India but also from Persia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, due to unstable politics and seeking economic opportunities in Hong Kong, because Hong Kong was gradually becoming a prosperous financial city around the 1970s. In the 1980s, Hong Kong upgraded to an international city, and the income of every household increased, they had a demand to employ a house helper to take care of their infants or elder parents, thus there were some Indonesians in Hong Kong around the 1980s. In the 1990s, Hong Kong's economic influence spread to African countries, so it is easy to find Africans in Hong Kong, including Nigerians and Ghanaians [12].

5. Construction of Masjid Kowloon

The full name of Masjid Kowloon is Kowloon Mosque and Islamic Center (九龍清真寺暨伊斯蘭中心/Masjid Kowloon wa Al-Markaz Al-Islami). The name reflects that



Figure 1.

After the commercialization of Kowloon by the Hong Kong government together with the construction of Tsim Sha Tsui station, masjid Kowloon is now located in the central business district. (source: Masjid Kowloon, Tsimshatsui, Hong Kong, the photo is provided by author's friend).

it is not solely for Muslims to pray at the mosque or celebrate Islamic festivals, but also for social connection and cultural exchange with non-Muslims. Hong Kong needs to connect with the Islamic world despite the fact that it is not an Islamic city. It was built in 1898, and it was innovated as the present-day image in 1982.

Masjid Kowloon is located at Tsim Sha Tsui, it aimed to accommodate the Indian Muslims to perform Friday prayers at first. The site was leased to the Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong (香港回教信托基金總會/Majlis Al-Amma' Muward Jaliyat Hong Kong, the board center is located at Wan Chai Mosque) in 1972 [13]. After the commercialization of Kowloon by the Hong Kong government together with the construction of Tsim Sha Tsui station, Masjid Kowloon is now located in the central business district. **Figure 1** shows that Masjid Kowloon was built in Tsimshatsui and is now accommodating thousands of prayers to perform praying at there.

6. Islamic activities inside Masjid Kowloon

Masjid Kowloon accommodates about 3500–4000 worshippers to perform prayers at the mosque, which is the largest mosque in Hong Kong [14], but it is far from fulfilling all of the Muslims in Hong Kong. It is estimated 300,000 Muslims in Hong Kong, they are Indonesians, Chinese, Pakistanis, Malaysians, and people from Islamic countries [15]. The Muslims in Hong Kong are satisfied with it despite their wish to have a bigger mosque for performing prayers, at least they can enjoy the right of performing religious rituals at the mosque. This opinion could be reflected by demanding to build more mosques in Tung Chung, Yau Ma Tei, and Sheung Shui. Unfortunately, only Masjid Tung Chung (Masjid Ismail) was successfully built in Tung Chung, and Masjid Ibrahim (in Yau Ma Tei) was said to be temporarily serving the peripheral Muslims.

In the past few decades, Masjid Kowloon held many times fasting during Ramadhan, celebrating Eid Al-Fitr and Eid-Al-Adha. They also provided prayer times every day, so that the worshippers could pray at the correct time. They also provide religious lessons for Muslim children to continue the Islamic tradition in these Muslim families. To fulfill the knowledge of Islam, there is a library inside the mosque. The mosque mainly provides English, Arabic, and Urdu as mediums of instruction [16] because the mosque is located near the Pakistani community. The Pakistanis in Hong Kong usually live in Kowloon for a higher salary and cheaper transportation costs. So, the Urdu words can be found in Masjid Kowloon, together with Chinese and English words. Sometimes the Indonesian workers go there to pray, but they usually go to Wan Chai Mosque (Ammar Mosque and Osman Ramju Sadick Islamic Center) as they provide Bahasa Indonesia.

7. Around Masjid Kowloon

After the commercialization of Tsim Sha Tsui, a lot of business shops and buildings were located around it. The construction of Tsim Sha Tsui station provides accessible transportation from all directions. Thus, Muslims can go to Masjid Kowloon for praying and can buy Halal food here.

A 17-storey Chungking Mansion (重慶大廈) is probably the most diversified culturally in Hong Kong, it is home to a lot of Muslims and non-Hong Kong people [17]. It is said to be one of the landmarks of globalization in Hong Kong [18]. You can find

the Islamic canteens and business activities here. Some Muslims choose to live here because of the religious practice, as Chungking Mansion is located just 300 meters away from Masjid Kowloon. You can also buy some food from the Halal meat stall at Haiphong Road Temporary Market, which is behind the mosque. Some Pakistanis and Indians set up shops here to serve Muslims. Foreign asylum seekers are also living here to get a sense of security from their hometowns. Some non-Muslim shops opened around them, which shows mutual tolerance and respect in Hong Kong.

In the past, as a lot of crimes happened at Chungking Mansion, and minorities, such as Indians, Pakistanis, and Africans, were really living at Chungking Mansion, thus some negative labels or comments were linked with them, including the Muslims. This also brought challenges to Masjid Kowloon in trying to clarify the differences between Islam and negative comments. Later, Chungking Mansions installed over 400 surveillance cameras to guarantee the safety of tourists, visitors, owners, tenants, and asylum seekers [19].

8. Highlight the reasons misunderstanding of Islam in Hong Kong

Islam as a religious minority in Hong Kong enjoys its right to continue religious activities. It is guaranteed by the Hong Kong government constitutionally and is widely tolerated by the Hong Kong people, so they are all-time-ready to share and interact with society. However, they are still facing some challenges.

The messiest challenge in the last two decades has been the negative labels placed on Muslims as a result of negative reports about extremism and terrorism [20]. The Muslims tried hard to improve the religious images but the achievement was unfavorable. Indeed, Islam is not a major religion in Hong Kong, so the schools think that they do not have to teach the students about Islam or the importance of ethnic harmony due to semi-homogeneity in cultural structure.

Hong Kong Chinese have the most proportional dominance in Hong Kong, thus traditional Chinese culture would be the dominant culture [21]. Polytheism is very common in traditional Chinese culture, like the worship of nature or unexplainable phenomena in daily life. Daoism and Buddhism are the major religions among Hong Kong Chinese. They would not classify the legality of food and behavior carefully because it does not exist in traditional religions, instead, they would rely on their common sense, personal understandings, or preferences. In contrast, Muslims follow monotheism in daily life, and the prohibition of polytheism was mentioned in Al-Quran and Al-Hadith.

Living in a Hong Kong Chinese-homogenized society would be stressful for Muslims, they must find halal food in supermarkets or restaurants based on their understanding of Islam. It is quite difficult to find halal restaurants in Hong Kong because the halal restaurants are not enough to accommodate Muslims and their locations are dispersed [22]. Sometimes Hong Kong Chinese do not understand why they continue to practice Islam in daily life even though they live in twenty-first century with us and commented them as a conservative group, unnecessary rivalries would inevitably happen in daily life.

The crisis of minorities' space is also becoming more sensitive in recent years. While the Hong Kong people are being asked to continue practicing local values, Hong Kong Muslims—especially non-Chinese Muslims are caught between upholding Islamic customs and recognizing (or even integrating) local values. This also involved the loyalty and integration of Hong Kong society that has been a long-standing concern, and not surprisingly brought difficulties in employment and interpersonal relations.

Those who are unable to integrate with Hong Kong values will most likely be marginalized in society, including concerns over their religious practices and privileges, despite Muslims being legally guaranteed religious freedom. So, it is enough for them to maintain life (including religious practice, and as important as—the cultural identities) in Hong Kong and they do not dare to think more in the real world.

Misunderstanding about Muslims also hampered cultural exchanges between Muslims and non-Muslims. This could be explained by social media misinterpretation. In the past, especially after the 911 terror attacks, Muslims became a social target. The emergence of Islamophobia is a good example to show this phenomenon. The public defames them as the source of global instability because they regard the news as their source of information without critical thinking and discuss it with their echo chambers. If they get recognition from their echo chambers and do not seek alternative information, they will believe that these opinions have already become the dominant consensus and will reject to receive new knowledge. Fortunately, the stigmatization of Muslims in Hong Kong is not as serious as it is in Europe and America. In this case, Hong Kong residents who have lived in the city for a longer period of time will be more familiar.

Indeed, Hong Kong enjoys a high literacy rate, but it does not mean that the public will be capable of critical reasoning. In Hong Kong, understanding Islam or Islamic teaching is not a compulsory course in primary schools and secondary schools because Hong Kong is a secular city and Islam is not a major religion here. Only Islamic schools, such as Islamic Kasim Tuet Memorial College in Chai Wan and Islamic Dharwood Pau Memorial Primary School, will provide Islamic teaching. It is apparently insufficient for Muslims [23].

Despite the Education Bureau's declaration to add some teaching materials about Islam in the course, such as Liberal Studies or History in secondary schools, and increase the supporting materials for the teachers due to the increasing number of Muslim students in Hong Kong [24], but it is inadequate for non-Muslim students to know the history and culture of Islam. Hong Kong does not have so much Islamic schools, only one secondary school, three primary schools, and three kindergartens. Thus, few people are familiar with Islam, Islamic teaching, and Islamic history. They are difficult to give out a fair and just commentary on the news in the Islamic world.

On the other hand, America's role in affecting the Muslims' hardship is not highly significant. Although Hong Kong people welcome America because of its considerable Christian population and its gradually changing political environment, as well as its indirectly correlated admiration for Israel's success, they seldom use America as a political tool to incite Muslims. Conversely, the role of people in understanding news will be more significant than the so-called American manipulation of Muslims or controversial issues about the Islamic world. Hong Kong is an international city, they respect the emergence of the Muslim community, but the people do not have adequate common sense of Islam or Islamic culture, and sometimes they will misunderstand Islam.

When there is news about terrorism or extremism in the Islamic world, netizens will link it to Muslims and believe they have a full picture of Islam. They did not realize that this was a kind of invisible discrimination and insult. For example, if a non-Muslim makes a verbal insult to Islam, other netizens will make a joke about it, claiming that the Muslims will bomb this person if they notice they are being insulted. Similar verbal insults could be seen on the online forum in Hong Kong, which is unfavorable to social harmony [25]. So, Masjid Kowloon takes an active role in promoting better religious relations.

Masjid Kowloon has long been striving on promoting the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. They know that they need to take measures to prevent the spread of religious stigmatization. Living as a Muslim in Hong Kong is not an easy way, especially after the 911 terror attacks and the rise and fall of ISIS. It is difficult to stop the stereotype among the people, but they have tried to improve the relations. Here, some examples demonstrated Masjid Kowloon's genuine desire to communicate and interact with society.

The first and deepest impression should be the course of understanding Islam, which was opened for the public to join. At that time, Hong Kong teachers suggested full and comprehensive learning in primary school and secondary school (corresponding to the examination reform in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination, or so-called HKDSE, this is the public examination in Hong Kong every Secondary 6 student will attend it after they finish their studies in secondary school). This was Liberal Studies (which was the same as General Studies in foreign countries). The DSE course required the students to learn anything at anytime and anywhere.

Due to this educational background in Hong Kong, Masjid Kowloon has held many times of courses about the understanding of Islam in the last decade. In both elementary [26] and immediate courses [27], Masjid Kowloon will share Islamic concepts, including marriage, food, clothing, religious practices, and human relationships. Among the invited speakers, Mr. Yusuf Yu and Mufti Muhammad Arshad are well-known Muslims in Hong Kong and always share valuable opinions with the public. According to my observation, about 200–300 people attended the course each week. The course also tried hard to clarify the differences between Islam and terrorists at that time.

9. Role of the mosque in improving the understanding of Islam in Hong Kong and its challenges (social and educational activities)

In order to reduce misunderstandings between Muslims and non-Muslims, Masjid Kowloon also holds a guided tour inside the mosque regularly. They have cooperated with the schools to take students there. These students are mostly non-Muslims and are being taught to be responsible and tolerant civilians at that time. Sometimes the mosque will hold a mosque open day for the public to understand more about Islam [28]. **Figure 2** shows that every attendant will receive the certificate at the end of the course if the attendant attends over 80% of the course.

Other than the course about Islam, they also provided a chance for non-Muslims to understand the early Muslims in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, local guided trips have become popular recently. Moreover, the outbreak of Covid-19 in these 2 years restricted people to travel abroad. Among those locally guided trips, guiding people to visit Muslim cemeteries, such as the Muslim cemetery in Happy Valley (built in 1870)¹ and another one is in Chai Wan, both on Hong Kong island. People can see early Muslim graves in these two cemeteries. Some successful figures can also be seen there, like the mother-in-law of General Omar Bai—Miss Luo Wen-Xiang(駱文驤), who

¹ The Mid-Levels used to have a Muslim cemetery, but it was ruined later. The location is at 25 Park Road Government Quarters today, in front of Euston Court Block 2. The colonial government named it as Mahomedan Cemetery. See [29]. See also [30].



Figure 2. Masjid Kowloon will hold annual courses for non-Muslims to learn about Islam. If the attendant attends more than 80%, masjid Kowloon will issue the certificate to the attendant. (source is provided by author).

was also the mother of Miss Ma Pei-Zhang (馬佩璋), was buried at Chai Wan Muslim Cemetery (see **Figure 3**).

In 2019, while Masjid Kowloon was sprayed with blue dye from a water cannon truck, a lot of Hong Kong people went to help clean up the mosque voluntarily [31]. In this case, it can be proven that the Hong Kong people understand the importance of mutual respect and tolerance among different religions. This also proves that the social connection and interaction that Masjid Kowloon did before was very successful. After that, the leaders went on to apologize for this mistake and emphasize the importance of ethnic, racial, and religious harmony in society [32]. This could be explained by the advanced information technology, the rise of the “equal Hong Kong people” concept in society, and the increasing number of Islamic studies in Hong Kong. Of course, the Muslims in Hong Kong—regardless of whether they are Pakistanis or Chinese Muslims, will no longer be introverted, they always eager to share their religious culture with other groups.

During the spread of Covid-19 from 2020 to 2022, the world is still encountering the threat of Covid-19. After the invention of the vaccine, the government opens a lot of vaccination centers throughout the city. Masjid Kowloon also participated in this project. They declared to open the vaccination center in March 2022. They said that they considered the religious custom in Islam and encouraged Muslim women to go out for vaccination, which could help increase the vaccination rate. At the same time, they also encouraged non-Muslims to get the vaccination there. This showed that they want to fulfill the duty of civic responsibility because Masjid Kowloon can be continued to tower at Tsim Sha Tsui is not easy history. On the other hand, they want to show their good intentions to society [33].

However, it is difficult to do more to improve relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, as they do not have a Muslim representative in Legislative Council,



Figure 3. *General Bai Chongxi wrote an inscription on his mother-in-law's tombstone, which is in Chai Wan Muslim cemetery.*

this implies that they only struggle for personal life (such as the sharing of the inspirational story) and cultural exchange with non-Muslims, to help maintain social harmony. They cannot take a meaningful steps to maintain relations with non-Muslims and religious harmony through political participation or economic power, as the discourse power of these social projects is dominated by Hong Kong Chinese.

Most trans-ethnic conversations or exchanges should be based on their equal political and economic power to gain visible achievements, otherwise, the achievement will only be limited to sharing inspirational stories or irregular cultural conversations. Non-Muslims' concern for Muslims' well-being will not last long. This is real politics.

10. Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can see that Masjid Kowloon tries hard to continue the Islamic teaching among Muslims, especially in this international financial city,

where the religious role is not heavier than other matters in society if we compare with the Islamic countries. It is imaginable and understandable to say that it is not easy to find a living space in Hong Kong. At the same time, they sensed that they are not alone in society, they are part of Hong Kong and they are willing to share their religious practices, history, and culture with non-Muslims. Hong Kong people are now gradually accepting their existence in Hong Kong, they understand the uniqueness of Islamic culture, and some people will call for mutual respect in the real world or on social media. In this case, the coexistence of multiculturalism in Hong Kong is quite successful.

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