GJAT | JULY 2024 SPECIAL ISSUE | pp 49-66
ISSN: 2232-0474 I E-ISSN: 2232-0482
http://jurnal.usas.edu.my/gjat/index.php/journal

Chinese Muslims and Their Non-Muslim Families on Muamalat Fiqh Co-Existence (*Ta'ayush)*

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Abstract

Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia often face dual rejection, viewed as traitors by their Chinese families and as outsiders by the Muslim communities. This study examines how these individuals navigate family conflicts while balancing their religious beliefs with Chinese Cultural heritage. Through qualitative semi structured interviews with 15 Chinese Muslims, three key findings emerged. Firstly, the Chinese Muslims feel disconnected from their Chinese original community due to their new identity, Secondly, they strive to preserve their Chinese cultural heritage while embracing their Muslim identity. Thirdly, they constantly negotiate their ethnic and religious identities especially with their non-Muslim families. Despite these challenges, the Chinese Muslims play a vital role as cultural bridges fostering understanding between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. This implication is significant as their efforts align with the Islamic concept of *Figh al ta'Ayush* (peaceful co-existence), contributing to social harmony. This study concludes that Chinese Muslims while facing identity issues, significantly contribute to intercommunal understanding. Future studies could explore Chinese Muslim parents' perception of Islam and their reasons for rejecting their children's conversion, proving further insights into these complex cultural dynamics.

Keywords: *Fiqh al-Ta'ayush*; Muslim Converts; Chinese; Bridge

Introduction

Islam spread widely during Prophet Muhammad's time reaching China before South East Asia, showing that Islam is not foreign to Chinese ancestors. Today in Malaysia, non-Malays convert to Islam for various reasons (finding life's meaning), personal (solving personal problems), social (interacting with Muslims), marriage, and practical (financial and welfare support). People normally convert when they truly understand Islam. Chinese

ISSN: 2232-0474 I E-ISSN: 2232-0482
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Muslims converts often experience significant life changes leading to new identity base on their relationship with God and the Muslim Community. This can cause conflict between their ethnic and religious identities, affecting their cultural, language and traditions (Bulut, 2020). In Malaysia, conversion to Islam is sometimes mistakenly seen as 'becoming Malay" which impacts relationships between and within ethnic groups This makes the community context crucial in the conversion process, highlighting its importance in Malaysia's complex social and ethnic landscape.

There is no doubt that religious conversion causes a significant change in a person's social relationships in the Chinese and Muslim communities. Conversion often forms a sociological boundary in a community; however, it does not mean that converts have to cut off completely from their previous 'pre-conversion social world'. The family especially serves as the motivational factor for Chinese Muslim converts to maintain a Chinese identity while also becoming Muslim (Lam, 2005). Both identities, being Chinese and being Muslim, are considered too important to surrender.

This study however fills the gap of studying the changes encountered by Chinese Muslims through their journey as Muslims and how they mediate and negotiate between their religious and ethnic identities while maintaining their Chineseness. It addresses the process of religious and ethnic identity construction and how identity construction mediates religious conversion among Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysian society. Based on the strong association between Muslim and Malay identity and a history of tension and conflict between the Malays and Chinese, Chinese Muslim converts have an important role to play in inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations coupled with inter-religious and intra-religious relations to build solidarity among multiple communities.

This study involves discussing the background of the current position of Chinese Muslims, their challenges, the formation of their identity, how they deal with the clash of their ethnic and Muslim identity, and how they learn to negotiate their boundaries as defined by their religious and ethnic identity. This position the Chinese bridge between the Chinese on one hand and the Muslim community, on the other hand, thereby helping to build a harmonious society in line with *Fiqh al-Ta'ayush. Fiqh al-Ta'ayush*, in other words, refers to understanding in living together with each other in a state of love and harmony which is very important in Malaysia. Thus, the objective of the research is to identify how Chinese Muslims can negotiate their ethnic and religious identity to convince their parents to accept them as Muslims and at the same time, for the Muslim Community to understand, support and respect the Chinese Muslims.

The term "Chinese Muslims" generally refers to people of Chinese descent in Malaysia who have converted to Islam. At the end of 2010, the population of the Chinese Muslim community in Malaysia was estimated to be 42,048 individuals (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015). However, this figure was much lower than that in 2000, which was 57,227 individuals. The decline in the number could be due to the possibility of non-disclosure as Chinese Muslims wish to maintain their lifestyle, avoid family rejection, and lastly, the children of mixed marriages of Chinese Muslims choose to register as Malays. However, according to some prominent Chinese Muslims, the realistic figure should be somewhere between 60,000 and

ISSN: 2232-0474 I E-ISSN: 2232-0482
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100,000 Chinese Muslims, as opposed to the under-declared official figures. Out of these, around 50–60% of Chinese Muslims are from the middle-class category, while less than 15% are from the high-income category (Kassim et al., 2017).

Islam regards conversion as a private matter and does not require the aspiring convert to perform any special rite of conversion, other than reciting the testimony of faith, the *syahada*, in front of two witnesses. The *syahada* is the Muslim declaration of belief in the Oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as God's Prophet (pbuh). In the Malaysian context, after conversion, they are known as *muallaf* (convert) or *saudara baru* (new brother/sister) (Awang et al., 2022). Many people embrace Islam because they are motivated to discover the meaning of life, find peace of mind, and engage in intellectual search (rational conversions), or due to relationships with Muslims (relational conversions), which are then referred to as non-instrumental or instrumental conversion, the latter being associated with marriage to a Muslim (Hass, 2020). As the convert shifts from being part of the majority group to being part of the minority group (Zhou, 2022), they deviate from parental and societal mainstream values and instead associate with new values and norms (Yee et al., 2019).

However, with ethnicity as one of the main sources of self-identification for Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia, the state and the Chinese community are two fundamental socializing institutions that shape ethnic identity formation. Firstly, Chinese Muslims are commonly labelled as 'becoming Malay' and the Federal Constitution describes a Malay as "a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom" (Federal Constitution, article 160[2]). It is in this context that non-Muslim Chinese consider a Chinese convert who practices the three elements of 'Malayness' as having '*masuk Melayu",* which is translated as "becoming Malay" (Nagata, 2011; Chin, 2020). Secondly, the Chinese community has a general misconception that when Chinese convert to Islam, they tend to gravitate toward the Malay social and cultural realm and prefer the use of *Bahasa Melayu* (the Malay language) over the use of Chinese (Paoliello, 2019). There is also a misconception that they should leave their Chinese identity and Chinese culture (Chin, 2020, Awang & Mat, 2020). It is with regards to this misconception that the Chinese converts are labelled as '*masuk Melayu*' or becoming Malay.

Religiously oriented actions that bring significant changes and influence day-to-day interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims serve as significant religious boundaries. These actions include changing one's name (to an Islamic name), dietary habits (consumption of halal food), bodily practices (dress code and appearance), social networks (relationships with family members, Chinese, and non-Chinese), economy (use of Islamic banking), education (school choice for children), as well as attitudes towards Chinese cultural practices, their former religion, and in general changing their entire way of life (Weng, 2018, Awang et al. 2022). The problem is exaggerated as the Chinese Muslims lack knowledge of Islam and do not show a good example causing their non-Muslim families to have a negative perception of Islam (Awang et al., 2022). The misconception arises not because the non-Muslim family does not like Islam but because they do not understand Islam (Chin, 2020).

From the Chinese perspective, crossing religious boundaries is seen as crossing ethnic boundaries as well. Therefore,

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conversion is a problematic decision that affects both the daily life of the new Muslim and their relationship with the ethnic and religious communities. It is seen as betraying their Chinese heritage and they are seen as throwing away their Chinese identity in their new life as Muslims (Awang & Mat, 2020). This misconception of having to abandon the Chinese culture and post-conversion identity is often the cause of conflict with their non-Muslim families. In response to the challenges to their Chinese identity from their family and friends, Chinese Muslim converts consciously negotiate their religious and ethnic boundaries based on the structure of daily routines and cultural practices.

Firstly, they participate in Chinese festivities but do not take part in religious rituals in order not to contravene their new beliefs (Awang et al., 2022). Secondly, in response to their families' concerns about losing ties, they consciously maintain their original surnames intending to pass them on to their children (Zhou, 2022). Regarding the headscarf, there are generally three attitudes toward wearing it: donning it all the time, donning it occasionally, and not donning it at all. They do it for various reasons: to inform others of their new religious identity, to show others that they are practicing Islam, and to regulate themselves to be devout *Muslimah* (Weng, 2018). Some choose to defer wearing the headscarf to ease the tension with their family's rejection of their conversion.

However, the tense nature of the relationship between the Chinese Muslims and their original non-Muslim families does not last long. It recovers after some period of adjustment and understanding. This happens when these converts strive to reconcile their ethnic and religious identities to show their families that they are still Chinese despite their conversion and working on negotiating religious and ethnic boundaries. Hence, Chinese Muslims play a role in uniting with their non-Muslim family including the Chinese community, and at the same time building a harmonious relationship with the Muslim community. There is a need for the integration of good relations with each other in the multi-cultural and multi-religious society in Malaysia. Islam introduces several concepts in *ta'amul* (interacting), namely *ta'aruf* (knowing each other), *ta'awun* (helping each other), and *takaful* (cooperating and protecting each other) which emphasizes cultivating the spirit of belonging and togetherness among human beings (Khambali, 2020).

This is in line with the *muamalat* Islamic concept of *Ta'ayush* which means love, and the principle of living in peace. They are derived from the verb 'āsya which brings the meaning of being alive (*Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka*, 2006). *Fiqh Ta'ayush* emphasizes the universality of Islam promoting peace, justice, and brotherhood among all people, regardless of their background. Khatijah continues to explain *al-Ta'ayush* as "Co-existence" which underscores the importance of Muslims introducing Islam to non-Muslims and living together in peace, even if the latter do not embrace Islam (Khambali, 2020). On the other hand, according to Kamaruzaman (2010), *Ta'ayush* means that each community has its own identity which is unique and has different characteristics in terms of religion, ethnicity, tribe, and language and lives together in harmony and happiness. This concept of co-existence or *al-Ta'ayush* is very relevant to the ethnic Chinese Muslims who have their own identity, culture, and language and yet play a role in bridging ethnic borders and religious borders.

Hence, under the concept of *Ta'ayush*, Chinese Muslims play a role as a bridge between the Chinese community and the

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Muslim community to create an atmosphere of living together in a supported community with the spirit of love and a high level of tolerance, accepting diversity, trusting each other, understanding each other while complementing each other (Aini & Ismail, 2018). Chinese Muslims try to maintain their ethnicity and explain Islam to their Chinese families and Chinese community in their daily 'dialogue of life' which is related to daily life issues that include both religious elements and aspects of daily life (Awang & Mohd Hambali, 2017). This *Muamalat* perspective in Islam recognizes the importance of the interconnectedness of human relationships, both with fellow human beings and Allah. It stresses that a complete and fulfilling life involves a strong connection with God and building harmonious relationships with others (Khalli et al., 2021).

Studies in the past on Chinese Muslims are very limited and restricted to religion and ethnicity. For example, Lam (2005) explored the reconstruction of religious conversion and concluded that religious and ethnic negotiation is inevitable. Shaharuddin et al. (2016), through their studies, found that young, educated, and single Chinese newly converts have a better understanding of Malay community culture to maintain the cultural integration between Chinese and Malays in Malaysia. This will improve the understanding of non-Muslims and help clear the misunderstanding that becoming a Muslim is not possible without becoming a Malay as concluded by the study carried out by Paoliello (2019), where crossing religious boundaries is equal to crossing ethnic boundaries. This study is important as it not only discusses identity negotiation but also recommends that Chinese Muslims play an important role as a bridge between the Chinese and Muslim communities in line with the concept of *Muamalat Fiqh Ta'ayush* promoting co-existence and driving towards harmony in diversity which is particularly important in the context of Malaysia's society of diverse ethnicity and racial beliefs.

Malaysia is a multi-cultural and multi-religious country, with Islam as its official religion. According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, out of the 6.4 million Chinese in Malaysia, 84% are Buddhists, 3.4% practice Taoism, 11% are Christians, and only 0.6% are Muslim (Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics, 2010). Only a small percentage of Chinese people have converted to Islam. Conversion to Islam significantly impacts the identity of the Chinese convert and their relationship with society, as well as society's response to their new status. Malays perceive Chinese customs and practices as non-Islamic not because they contradict Islamic beliefs and practices, but because they differ from Malay customs and practices. Significant changes were found in the daily lives of Chinese Muslim converts resulting in a shift in their identity and boundaries, including changing their name to an Islamic name, adopting new beliefs and habits such as consuming halal food, and adhering to Islamic dress codes, and becoming involved in learning about Islamic doctrines.

This change to an Islamic identity often leads to conflicts with their ethnic identity and boundaries of culture, language, and religion. In most cases, this change is not accepted by their families, resulting in family hostility that serves as the main motivation for Chinese Muslim converts to reconcile their ethnic and religious identities. This, coupled with misunderstandings about Islam and the media's role in amplifying Islamophobia, has created a negative image of Muslims. As a result, parents may resent their children for "*masuk Melayu*", meaning to become Malays (Paoliello, 2019).

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Therefore, this study examines how Chinese Muslims navigate family conflicts over their faith while balancing their religious beliefs with Chinese Cultural heritage. How we educate the Muslim community by creating a feeling of mutual love for the converted Chinese Muslims, helping them, cooperating, respecting each other, and living harmoniously together in line with the concept of *Fiqh al ta'ayaush.*

Methodology

The research was conducted using the descriptive data qualitative method. The study included a total of 15 Chinese converts who are members of the Chinese Muslim Association Malaysia, comprising 8 females and 7 males aged between 25 and 55 years old. Of the 15 participants, 6 converted five years ago or less, 4 participants converted between 6 to 10 years ago, and 5 participants converted more than 20 years ago. All 15 participants are of Chinese descent, with one who was a previous Catholic Christian, one was a Japanese Buddhist, and the remaining 13 were Taoist Buddhists. This study uses the purposive sampling method which refers to a group that has the characteristics of the sample desired by the researcher (Ismail, 2011). The sample size is considered sufficient for this qualitative case study. According to Lichtman (2010), there are no "hard" rules for how many units should be included in the research sample. Sandelowski (1995) also agreed that most qualitative studies are conducted with small sample sizes. The interview method was selected to better capture the essence of the lived experiences of the Chinese Converts, as their conversational narrative and its consequences were a major theme in their lives. As Seidman (2006) argued in his publications, which are often used as guides for qualitative methodology, the purpose of an in-depth interview is not to get answers to questions or to test hypotheses but rather to understand other people's experiences and the meaning they attribute to those experiences.

The questions were constructed based on the themes identified, with a list of questions as a guide during the interview process. The interview guide can be used as a checklist to ensure that no information is missed, and data collection is stopped when the data obtained has reached saturation (Creswell, 2012). The interview results were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the findings presented through descriptive narratives. To maintain the confidentiality of the respondents and facilitate analysis, the identities of all participants presented in this article were anonymised and their names were changed accordingly.

The analysis method used for this study is a thematic analysis by an inductive approach, where the themes identified from the data are strongly linked to the collected dataset (Majumdar, 2022). The inductive technique involves the coding process of research data after its collection. All data were coded into three sub-themes. Firstly, the loss of sense of belonging of the Chinese Muslim post-conversion, and secondly, being Muslims and maintaining their Chinese identity. From these two sub-themes, the third section discusses how the converts negotiate their Chinese Cultural practices and the Islamic teachings and their role in bridging both the Chinese community and the Muslim community reflecting the concept of *Fiqh al-Ta'ayush* in Malaysian society. Finally, based on the narratives, the study draws a conclusion from the participants about what it means to be Malaysian Chinese Muslims in the Malaysian context and their role as an 'intermediate community' to help achieve building a harmonious society through unity in diversity.

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Results and Discussion

This section explores what features emerged as Chinese Muslims by focusing on some of the themes in the ethnography and how they negotiate their religious and ethnic boundaries to include Islam in their daily life. The results of the study found that firstly, the Chinese Muslims feel like strangers in the Chinese Community as their new Muslim identities are not acceptable even by their own family and they are not welcomed by the Muslim community who are suspicious of their motive to embrace Islam. This resulted in their loss of sense of belonging as they stood in the middle ground between the Chinese and the Muslim community (Azarudin & Khatijah, 2017)

Secondly, the Chinese Muslims confided that they must work towards maintaining their Chinese identity as Muslims to elevate the anger of their parents who resented them for being Muslims. The sensitive issues involved in the change of name, change of attire, change of diet, and for the *Muslimah* having to wear the hijab, just to name a few. Thirdly, they must learn to negotiate their religious boundaries and cultural boundaries as Muslims by maintaining their Chinese names or at least maintaining their surname and taking part in cultural activities as long as they do not contravene the issue of *akidah* or Islamic faith in the process. Through their daily interaction explaining their action as Muslims and sharing knowledge of Islam with their non-Muslim families, they learn to be tolerant and most of them overcome their conflict with their families after a few years (Qinyi, 2022, Ta & Bashrah, 2022)They play an important role in uniting both the Chinese Community and the Muslim community promoting understanding and harmony in the society putting in the action of *Muamalat Fiqh Co-existence (Ta'ayush*) in the Malaysian multi-cultural and multi-religious scenario (Azarudin & Khatijah, 2017)

Loss of Sense of Belongingness

With a new identity, daily experiences are exhibited unconsciously as Chinese Muslims live their everyday life. As they interact with the other communities, they develop a sense of being different, and they feel they no longer fit into the Chinese community due to their change in identity. Additionally, they do not feel the Muslim community accepts them as newcomers. This loss of sense of belonging was clearly described by Ibrahim as follows:

> *"I think we slowly will lose the identity, there is a crisis, we are not in the Malay, and we are not in the Chinese, we are in the middle. But are we able to stand out as a different community like a strong community that should be our target because when we become Chinese converts, we mostly feel very alone and there is a tendency to go back to the previous religion so the Chinese Muslim Community must be strong so that we feel united like a family."* (Ibrahim, aged 30 converted in 2013).

> *That is what they thought because once you become a Muslim the Chinese community will get rid of you and at the same time the Malay community doesn't really accept you so you become like a neither here nor there.*

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(Johan, aged 47 converted in 1996)

This feeling of being in the middle ground, being placed on undefined ground marked by "in-betweenness" - Muslim but not Malay; Chinese yet Muslim, although not by birth (Paoliello, 2019) resulting in Chinese Muslims developing a sense of being different, even as they are being differentiated (Chin, 2020). They do not feel they belong to either community as they are rejected by their own family, and at the same time, they are also being rejected by the Malay community, according to the above narration.

When Chinese Muslim are accused of betraying their family and are disowned, they may look forward to being welcomed by the Muslim community. They may also be looked down by born Muslims for being outsiders (not Malays) and not knowing enough about Islam. Hence, they are marginalized, treated as strangers, and rejected by both their religious and ethnic communities for being Muslims.

The Muslim community currently lacks inclusivity and fails to emulate the spirit of the Ansar in Medina during the Prophet's era. Unlike the Ansar, who selflessly sacrificed everything to assist the newly arrived Muhajirin, there is a need for the Muslim community to adopt the *Muamalat* Islamic concept of *Ta'ayush which means* mutual love, care, and harmonious living. It is imperative to educate the Malay community about the importance of attending to the needs of Chinese Muslims, providing guidance, and ensuring their financial and social well-being, like the support extended by the Ansar. Mosques can play a pivotal role by enlisting volunteers as mentors for Chinese Muslims in the vicinity, inspiring and imparting Islamic knowledge to facilitate their growth as devout individuals, role models within their families, and respected members of the broader community.

Being a Muslim and Yet Maintaining a Chinese Identity

Significant changes were found in the daily lives of Chinese Muslim converts regarding their habits and religious practices after conversion. This resulted in the ethnic and religious identity change of Chinese converts, starting with a change of name, which signifies their Muslim identity publicly. However, it should be noted that when a Malaysian Chinese converts to Islam, he brings with him an ancestral legacy. This is most evident in the surname, as he carries his ancestral name with him. His surname gives him a sense of identity, tells him about his family and ancestral links and history, and grounds him in his Chinese roots and civilization. As such, a Chinese is sensitive that, in becoming a Muslim, he must forgo his surname. Walid explained the reason for maintaining his Chinese name after his conversion as follows:

"This is quite a crucial issue here because, as Chinese, it is important to trace back our roots and it is important for us to recognize our identity, and the recognition is not about the religion we are practicing, it's about our surname. The line of ancestry, and the background of the family are all traced back from our name, and the Chinese need to practice and carry on the name given by our father and use it in our daily life, so the name must be kept. We must use the name given by our father until the end of the day."

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(Walid, aged 37 converted in 2020)

The effect of Chinese Muslims changing their name has a very negative impact on their parents even to the extent of disowning their children. Rizuan was disowned by his parents when they found out that he had changed his name. He explains as follows:

> *"So, they know I changed my name, so the response is ye lah, is a part of the process where they disown me because I discarded the name of the family.* (Rizuan, aged 37, converted in 2011).

The Chinese parents disown their children because of the concern that their children can no longer practice their culture and lose their Chinese cultural identity. The misunderstanding is that their children are expected to assimilate into the mainstream of Malay society by preferring Malay over their Sinitic language, by wearing Malay traditional attire, and by preferring the Malay diet, among other practices. To a certain extent, it seems that it is not possible to be a Muslim without being a Malay (Paoliello, 2019). This is the reason why the Chinese interpret the action of embracing Islam as "*masuk Melayu*" because the whole lifestyle of the Chinese Muslim changed so much that it is not acceptable to the Chinese Community. As a result, Chinese parents are more open to their children converting to other religions but not Islam, as becoming a Muslim involves a change of name, eating habits, dress code, and a total way of life which is very different from the Chinese culture. Dini shared how her mother commented about her conversion to Islam when she broke the news to her mother:

> *"It would be much easier if you become a Christian, you know……I am not against it (my conversion) but find it hard to accept.* (Dini, aged 34, converted in 2019).

This misconception of changes gravitating towards becoming Malay and leaving the Chinese identity has resulted in familial rejection of their children's conversion to Islam. In fact, it is generally more difficult for Muslim women as they face challenges specifically women in Islam. For a start, the outlook of a *Muslimah* is very different from the previous lifestyle, especially with the change in Islamic attire. Most parents could not accept the outward manifestations once a Chinese *Muslimah* starts wearing a headscarf. Aishah shares her experience as she was openly separated from her family during her sister's wedding. Her narration is as follows:

> "*My mother even tried to prevent me from attending my sister's wedding. You `know they just put me at a table for friends I was not at the family table; you know because I was wearing a head scarf. So, this is so hard because she is ashamed to tell her friends that her daughter is a Muslim*." (Aishah, aged 43, converted in 1996).

Aishah's mother decided not to place Aishah at the family table because she was ashamed of making it public that her daughter was a Muslim. Similarly, Dutch *Muslim*ah faced the same problems with their parents where, in some cases, wearing the headscarf is more difficult for the parents to accept than conversion itself because wearing the headscarf is a public

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announcement of their daughter's conversion (Hass, 2020). A British *Muslimah* convert was told "You are a European. Go back to your roots. Why are you wearing a headscarf?" (Sealy, 2022). In general, *Muslimah* wearing a headscarf tend to have a backlash as it is a public display of their conviction.

Attire is not only a sensitive issue for *Muslimah*, but it also affects male converts if they are wearing clothes with Islamic identity. Rizuan shared his experience when his father saw him wearing Muslim attire and his father cried upon seeing his son wearing attire that was alien to him. It made him think that his son had abandoned Chinese culture and heritage. To the Chinese, the costumes and attire are very much part of their culture. The Chinese not only hold on to the customs but feel proud of their heritage and culture. They believe that their culture is in a higher position compared to that of other races and nations. This is inevitable because the Chinese have inherited a long history, culture, and civilization.

Their rejection of Islam is not due to the essence of Islam, but a misunderstanding on the part of Chinese Muslims' familly, which causes familial conflict. The Chinese in Malaysia have tenaciously maintained their ethnic consciousness and their ties to primordial loyalties. The idea of keeping alive their Chineseness is embedded as a cultural and moral obligation as part of their historical tradition. It is therefore important that Chinese Muslims win the hearts of their parents by maintaining their Chineseness as confirmed by the following interviewees:

> *"……I believe my perspective on everything is still the same as following the cultural things, so I believe I've not changed my ethnic identity."* (Julia, aged 25, converted in 2019)

> *"Chinese Muslims maintain the Chinese culture, but their way of life is based on Muslim teaching, Islamic teaching."* (Ibrahim, aged 30, converted in 2013

From the above accounts, we can infer that a Chinese Muslim, within the Malaysian context, is an individual of Chinese descent who preserves his/her Chinese cultural heritage while embracing his/her Muslim identity. All interviewed respondents unanimously affirmed that they do not forsake their ethnicity, concurrently upholding their Chineseness. This distinctive characteristic enables the Chinese Muslims to connect with their non-Muslim families and the broader Chinese community, while fostering a harmonious rapport with the Muslim community. In this synergy, the manifestation of the *Ta'ayush* concept becomes evident. In Malaysia's multicultural and multireligious society, there is a pressing need to foster positive interrelations, aligning with the vision of Malaysia Madani as championed by the current government under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. This vision emphasises good governance, sustainable development, and racial harmony.

From the above findings, the dimensions in the construction of "Chineseness" refers to the cultural practices with distinct attributes such as language, and cultural traditions exhibited in a Chinese person's daily life. The second dimension is their Chinese conscious identification of who they are. This leads to the two dimensions that are in line with the study by Chin (2020) with respect to the construction of Chineseness. From this study, a third dimension of

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Chineseness can be added which is the Chinese outlook on life which includes being ethnocentric, being positive, willing to learn new knowledge, hardworking, and always wanting to improve themselves. This is evident from the respondents who have achieved success amidst facing challenges post-conversion. Out of the 15 respondents, 6 of them are Ph.D. holders out of which 2 are holding their post as Professors in their Universities while another 6 are graduates holding Degrees in various fields. We then proceed to look at while maintaining their Chineseness, how they reconcile the Chinese practices without contravening the Syariah rulings.

Reconciling the Chinese Cultural Practices and the Islamic Teachings

Accommodation of discrepant identities does not necessarily require Chinese Muslims to abandon their Chinese identity entirely. In Chinese culture, greater emphasis is placed on cultural life than religious life. Therefore, when their child converts to Islam, Chinese parents' rejection of the religion is not due to the essence of Islamic teachings, but rather their fear that their child will no longer be able to practice Chinese culture. Chinese converts face family hostility, which forces them to negotiate their ethnic and religious identities daily to reconcile with their non-Muslim families. They may participate in Chinese festivals but refrain from engaging in religious rituals. Participating in Chinese festivals and cultural activities is important to the Chinese Muslims because they see it as strengthening and defending their culture which is closely related to the development aspects of their Chinese identity (Sulaiman et al. 2020)

For the Chinese, the Spring Equinox and the Winter Solstice are two cultural events that mark the beginning and end of the Chinese calendar. Fatin explained the significance of Chinese festivals as follows:

> *"Traditionally, Chinese festivals are based on seasons. So, like springtime, you got Chinese New Year and when it ends, and then in the wintertime, you have winter Solace, and in the autumn time you have Mooncake Festival, so these are all based very much on our seasons…. I can take out the religious and ritual things from the festivals and I see these festivals as 2 things. Number one is to remember the time……. The second thing is for a family to get together. So, I see festivals in Chinese traditions are just for these 2 purposes. Not religious, not ritual but more for family and to look at how time flies. So, I celebrate them with my family"* (Fatimah, aged 40, converted in 2002)

Similarly, when it comes to weddings, Chinese Muslims learn to navigate and participate in these events without engaging in religious rituals. Their involvement in these activities is mainly to show support and strengthen their relationship with their family. Binyamin explains how a Chinese wedding can be adapted to align with Islamic principles.

> "*We can maintain our culture if it doesn't go against the teaching of Al-Quran and Sunnah Nabi Muhammad. For example, if we're doing a ceremony for a wedding, we can still*

ISSN: 2232-0474 I E-ISSN: 2232-0482
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> *do it in the Chinese way. The bride and groom can wear Chinese attire if tutup aurat (cover-up). And then they can do the tea ceremony (Chinese Customary). Because that is not going against the teaching of Al-Quran and Sunnah."* (Binyamin, aged 40, converted in 2017).

Chinese Muslims are required to negotiate their involvement in funeral and burial arrangements too. Rizuan explained how he took charge of arranging the burial of his stepfather without getting involved with the religious rituals of his stepfather's religion. Generally, the confusion stems from ignorance among Muslims who are unable to differentiate between things that can be agreed upon together in religious diversity and things that cannot be negotiated if they contravene Islamic teachings. Therefore, in cultural matters, if the external element does not tarnish the authenticity of religion, then it can be adapted and assimilated into Islamic society. This view was echoed by Johan, with his explanation as follows:

> "*OK, that's why, uh, for those converts they must study more on the Fiqh Uh, they need to understand more because before this, uh, we thought even the cultural things we cannot attend or perform. So, of course, the Malays, don't really understand because they see the culture as the religion, but once you study and then you have the knowledge, then you know how to differentiate between cultural or religious activities. In that case, then it's easier for you to know what is permissible, what is forbidden"* (Johan, aged 47, converted in 1996)

This is in line with the coexistence approach (*fiqh al-ta'ayusy*) to promote harmony and cope with religious conflicts (Khambali, 2020), thereby resolving the main issue concerning Chinese Muslims who face conflicts mainly based on the cultural differences practiced by the Chinese Muslim and Malay Muslim communities. Similarly, to overcome the issue of losing ties with their family, Chinese Muslim converts negotiated boundaries and defined their religious and ethnic identity to include Islam in their daily lives through a process of socialization, as narrated by the respondent as follows:

> "*Uh, uh, I suggest to them. I say why not just have my own set of kitchenware. If I come back here I just use all these things. Then we cook together, and then we all can eat together, so Alhamdulillah they also agreed with it"* (Sophia, aged 55 converted 1998)

This is in line with the concept of "dialogue of life", where social interactions and daily activities between Chinese Muslims and both non-Muslim and Muslim communities, help to explain the misconceptions and misunderstandings on different aspects of cultural and religious issues. This can be illustrated by the Chinese Muslim, Johan, who was interviewed and he explained that he encouraged his wife to learn Mandarin and get involved with cultural practices as a

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means of getting closer to his family. This was proven to be effective as evidenced by Rizuan who was interviewed and confirmed that his relationship with his non-Muslim family improved after a short period with regular social interactions as follows:

> *"Uh, talking about this, for my family, it is a temporary only lah. I mean about a month right before I converted and then 6 months after I had converted So, Alhamdulillah, currently you know my relationship with my parents is even better than before I am a Muslim*." (Rizuan, aged 37 converted in 2011)

More importantly, Chinese Muslims must lead a way of life based on the guidelines outlined as stated in the Quran and the Sunnah. In applying religious values and building a Muslim character following the role model of Prophet Muhammad, Chinese Muslims can portray themselves as having acquired a better character as compared to pre-conversion. However, this is only possible with acquired knowledge of Islamic studies. This is in line with the view of Awang et al. (2022) who asserted that Islamic education can 'flourish the emotions of a convert' while facing conflict with the family due to his conversion to Islam by re-adjusting life according to the Islamic framework and changing the value of life by Islamic teachings. This is the reason why after a short period, most parents of Chinese Muslims could accept their children as Muslims. Rizuan shared his experience as follows:

> *"So, Alhamdulillah now you know my relationship with my parent is even better than before I am a Muslim. Yeah, OK, and then the changes of lifestyle after conversion, so these changes of lifestyle after conversion a major key point why my family at last accepted me. So first the change of the lifestyle is I became much more disciplined…. (Secondly) changes of lifestyle, like I was a drinker. Quite heavy, uh, yeah, uh, because of my career at the time. Uh, then after I converted, I quit, I really quit. OK and then the third one is the changes in the adab. The manners, the adab… You know Salaam with your parents. To hug your parents, it's not in our culture…. I went to study in Pusat Bimbingan Saudara Baru, Sungai Petani, Kedah. Now everybody respects me because they see changes in my life as a Muslim."*

However, Johan took a longer time to reconcile with his family but after that, his relationship with his family was also better after he became a Muslim.

> *"My relationship with my parents was not good for 6 to 7 years after I converted to Islam. In fact, uh, after my marriage also not OK after I got my son Only OK, because when I brought home my son. First, uh, my mother refused to see Uh, only grandson…. until my son*

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> *was one year old…. always bring him home to visit his grandmother….”* (Johan, aged 47, converted in 1996)

This dialogue approach to life is diverse and includes celebrations, implementing religious rituals, visiting families of different religions, sharing life experiences, involvement in mutual aid activities, and others. It enables Chinese Muslims to explain the appropriateness of defending Chinese culture, preserving their respective identities, and yet becoming Muslim (Awang et al., 2019). This means that in addition to explaining the truth about the religion and the fact of ‘becoming Muslims, conveying the message of Islam wisely can be done to non-Muslim family and close friends as they are more proficient in mastering the language, culture, and thinking of their Chinese people (Kawi & Abdullah., 2020).

Given this, Chinese Muslims are unique because instead of seeing themselves as a “double minority” (an ethnic minority among Malaysian Muslims and a religious minority within the Malaysian Chinese), Chinese Muslims capitalize on their strategic positions as a bridge between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia. This is reflected in three aspects of developments relating to Chinese Muslims over the last twenty years, such as the Chinese architecture mosques and the Chinese Muslim restaurants springing up throughout the country, coupled with the active da’wah activities by Chinese Muslim preachers. All of these are indications that Chinese Muslims are gearing towards an identity of their own creating a cross-cultural image gearing towards harmony in diversity.

Similarly, having Chinese Muslim preachers or *mubalighs* in the da’wah scene adds diversity because, being able to speak in their mother tongue, Chinese Muslim preachers such as Brother Firdaus Wong, Brother Lim Jooi Soon, Brother Hussein Yee, and many others can appeal to the Chinese who are not yet Muslims. They play the role of reaching out to both nominal Muslims to be better Muslims and, secondly, spreading Islamic messages to non-Muslims with the hope that they will convert to Islam. This scenario of mixing and mingling different ethno-religious and cultural groups in Malaysia with Chinese Muslims is described by Bayat (2008) as ‘everyday cosmopolitanism’, generating hybrid identities positioning themselves to uphold Chinese culture that is inclusive and tolerant. Malaysian Chinese Muslims seem to act as a “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991) within the three sources of identity, being Malaysian, Chinese, and Muslim, playing a role in social interaction, cultural mixing, and identity contestation. This scenario seems to be the same as the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia (Weng, 2018).

The ability to speak the language and have knowledge of Chinese customs and practices places Chinese Muslims in a strategic position to act as a bridge between both intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic communities. However, this is possible only if the Chinese Muslims play their role by:
acquiring good Islamic knowledge to be able to share Islam with the non-Muslim family and the Chinese community, displaying a good moral character to their family to show that they are a better child as Muslims than before, and being active in the da’wah arena in clarifying misconceptions of Islam and promoting peaceful co-existence in a multi-cultural and multi-religious Malaysian society.

This tolerant attitude on both sides involves understanding and accommodating

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differences through the interweaving of three-tiered religious dialogues at the grassroots level, either intra-ethnic (Chinese Muslims with non-Muslim family members) or inter-ethnic (Malay and Chinese communities) (Awang et al., 2019) exactly describe the concept of *fiqh al-Ta'ayush* in action as shown in Figure 1.

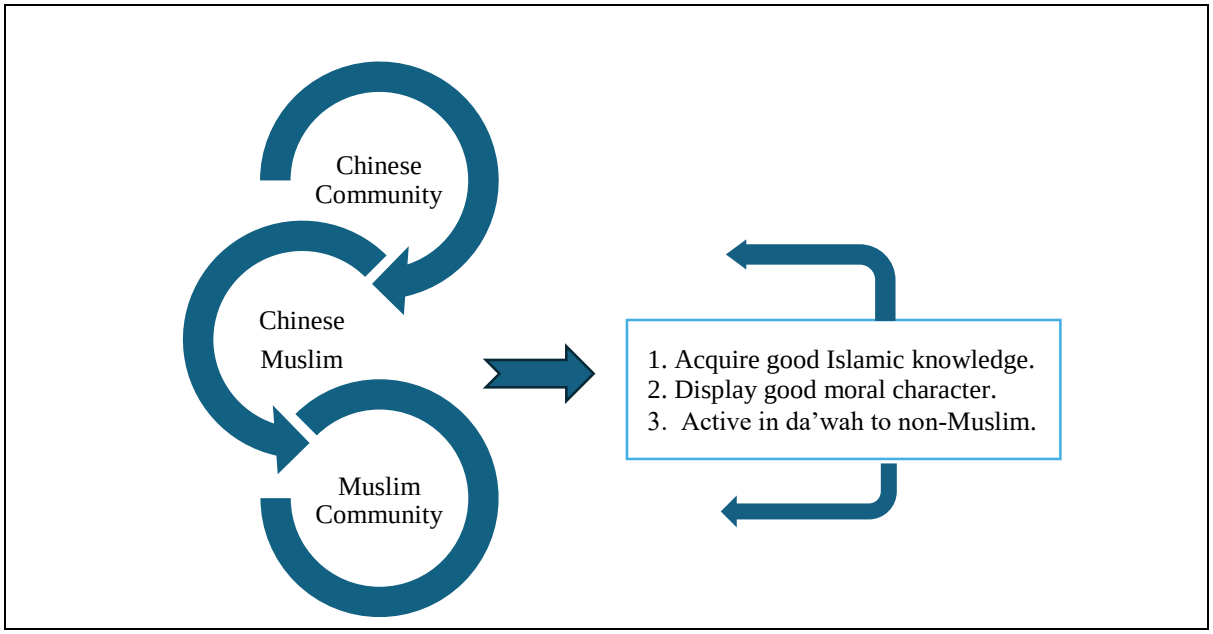

Figure 1: Role of Chinese Muslims in Promoting Harmony in Diversity in Line with The Concept of Muamalat Fiqh Co-Existence (Al-Ta'ayush)

Conclusion

In Malaysia, Chinese Muslims often face a complex identity negotiation process following their conversion to Islam, this study reveals that many experience familial conflicts due to perceived abandonment of their Chinese heritage, while simultaneously feeling marginalized within the Muslim community due to the limited Islamic knowledge. Navigating this dual minority status, these individuals learn to redefine their religious and ethnic identities, integrating Islam into their daily lives, while preserving their Chinese cultural practices that align with their Islamic principles. Through open communication, addressing misconceptions and maintaining their Chinese identity, they gradually reconcile with non-Muslim family members. This process of balancing their faith with their cultural heritage not only resolve cultural conflicts but also position Chinese Muslims as important bridges between the ethnic and religious communities, embodying the concept of *al Ta'ayush* (co-existence) in Malaysian society.

Acknowledgement

The researchers would like to express their gratitude to FRGS/1/2023/SS10/UITM/02/26 under the Ministry of Higher Education and 600-RMC/FRGS 5/3 (053/2023) under Universiti Teknologi MARA for providing funds for this research.

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