My initial interest in the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia stems from a general fascination with the Chinese communities of Southeast Asia. As a third-generation Chinese Buddhist born in Batavia in 1950, I was raised in one of these diverse communities. While it seems inconceivable to the non-Muslim Chinese living in Indonesia or Southeast Asia today that their ancestors would have taken the Islamic faith, history paints a different picture. My paternal grandfather used to say that, if given a choice, he would have gone to Surabaya instead of Singapore. And he had taken a prabu or indigenous faith, writes French historian Claudine Salmon, because it would reduce the population liable to the poll tax and facilitate the fusion of the Chinese with the Javanese. This policy of separate development, predicted by those of Sukarno, would contribute to the contemporary notion that Chinese and Islam are totally incompatible.

But even with the Dutch regulations in place, conversions persisted. By the start of the 19th century, most of the cities in Java, Maluku and Madura had a district called Kampung Peranakan. The term peranakan adds Salmon, because it would reduce the population liable to the poll tax and facilitate the fusion of the Chinese with the local population, thereby illustrating the long history of assimilation between the Chinese and the indigenous peoples. Perhaps the most famous example is former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, who claims to be a 12th-generation descendent of Chinese Muslim Lim Tau Kian whose sons are credited for developing the town of Mentok. This Muslim family is also considered to be the first developers of Bangka's tin, writes historian M. F. Somers Heidhues. On the island of Bangka, I met with Abang Faizal, a 12th-generation descendent of Chinese Muslim Lim Tau Kian whose sons are credited for developing the town of Mentok. This Muslim family is also considered to be the first developers of Bangka's tin, writes historian M. F. Somers Heidhues.

In the early 19th century, the Chinese communities of Indonesia were divided. Many Chinese communities would eventually merge into the prabu population, adds Salmon. With these concerns in mind, I have also documented the mosques, kramat (holy tombs) and villages related to the history of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia. Examples include Banten's Masjid Pacinan and Jakarta's Masjid Kramat Jati, both of which are known to have served the Chinese communities. Today, there are some 60,000 Chinese Muslims in Indonesia and most of whom are converts, notes Rosey Wang, a Chinese Muslim researcher from Malaysia. I have also documented the activities of organizations like PITI (Persatuan Indonesian Union of Chinese Muslims) and the Haji Karim Oei Foundation – both of which serve the Chinese Muslim communities.

The third section of my project is to track down and photograph those Muslim prabu who are willing to acknowledge their Chinese ancestry, thereby illustrating the long history of assimilation between the Chinese and the indigenous peoples. Perhaps the most famous example is former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, who claims to be a 12th-generation descendant of Chinese Muslim Lim Tau Kian whose sons are credited for developing the town of Mentok. This Muslim family is also considered to be the first developers of Bangka’s tin, writes historian M. F. Somers Heidhues. On the island of Bangka, I met with Abang Faizal, a 12th-generation descendant of Chinese Muslim Lim Tau Kian whose sons are credited for developing the town of Mentok. This Muslim family is also considered to be the first developers of Bangka’s tin, writes historian M. F. Somers Heidhues. But even with the Dutch regulations in place, conversions persisted. By the start of the 19th century, most of the cities in Java, Maluku and Madura had a district called Kampung Peranakan. The term peranakan adds Salmon, because it would reduce the population liable to the poll tax and facilitate the fusion of the Chinese with the Javanese. This policy of separate development, predicted by those of Sukarno, would contribute to the contemporary notion that Chinese and Islam are totally incompatible.

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Palembang, south Sumatra / 2008

Born in 1965, Merry Effendi (黄风华) says she first received the hidayah (guidance or gift from Allah, leading to the righteous path) before meeting her future husband Mohammad Effendi in high school. Effendi’s father is Palembangese and his mother is from central Java.

After going out for three years, Merry told her family a week before the wedding that she would be marrying the Muslim. At that time, her family members were Catholic converts, although they have become Protestants since 2003. Needless to say, they were angry with her decision. Merry’s sister tried to lock her up but she managed to escape. Even though they didn’t give their consent, Merry’s family still turned up for the wedding in 1985. Merry’s relationship with her family got better only when her first son M. Ferry Antoni Effendi was born.

For several years, the Hakha lady worked as an insurance agent but client demands wore her down. She left the job and on February 2008, she started a small bakso (meatball) stall in front of their rented house at 27 Ilir (downstream). Her husband, who is quite a strict father, works as an admin staff at a local university.

She is seen getting ready for Sholat Isya (one of the five mandatory Islamic prayers usually performed in Indonesia after 7pm) at the end of another fasting day.
Bujang (b. 1967; 黄志良, right) used to be a Confucius believer. Around eight years back, he dreamt of the adzan (prayer call) and converted into Islam. All the religions are the same, says the Hokkien businessman. It is the same way to heaven. He continues: “I didn’t convert to have better business. I think Islam is a very deep religion and I really like the idea of zakat (alms-giving to the poor).” He admits quite openly that he doesn’t perform sholat (five daily Islamic prayers) regularly and that he only fasts occasionally because of gastric pain. And yet, he drinks almost every night.

“If you sholat five times a day but your heart is rotten, what’s the point of the prayers?” asks Bujang. “Similarly, if you give food willingly to the needy, you will receive credit from Allah. But if do so while cursing behind people’s back, what use is it to give food in the first place?” His justification is rather peculiar because it seems possible to argue away anything with that reason.

Bujang earns a living by buying used chemical containers from places like Singapore and Jambi, and selling them to clients around Palembang. He earns about US$0.50 for each “unprocessed” container sold. If he cleans and repaints each container, Bujang stands to earn around US$1. Indonesians normally use the containers to hold water for bathing and other purposes. “It is very easy to earn money in Indonesia, so long as you are not lazy,” adds Bujang.

A new shipment of used containers has just arrived this Saturday afternoon. The sudden downpour has given the workers and the Chinese Muslim the perfect excuse to take a smoking break on the verandah. Meanwhile, Bujang is seen trying to collect some rainwater with the older containers that he has already cleaned.
Palembang, south Sumatra / 2008

Born in 1959, Aminah (李德云, in brown) received the hidayah (guidance or gift from Allah, leading to the righteous path) in 1978 and converted to Islam. She married a Palembangese villager in 1980, giving birth to one daughter and three sons. She gave away two of her sons to a pribumi or “indigenous” family because she had no money to raise them. In 1988, the Chinese Muslim divorced her husband after the marriage turned sour.

Nowadays, Aminah goes from door to door selling cakes and pempek (Palembangese speciality – a mixture of sago, fish and seasonings made into balls and deep fried or grilled) made by two of her neighbours. Aminah earns about US$60 to US$82 a day. Apart from that, she has to do all the housework on her own, which wears her out very quickly. Both her children are working and each of them earns about US$30 a month. The family lives in a rented space at 27 Ilir (downstream), an area where Aminah has been staying since her childhood days. The monthly rental is around US$35, including utilities.

“If God gives us this much, what can I do? I feel ashamed to ask others for things,” says the Hakha lady. “Once, someone offered to employ me for US$50. I declined because I prefer to work on my own. I don’t want to be scolded by my employer.”

On the morning of Idul Fitr at the end of the fasting month, Aminah is seen greeting a pribumi visitor while on her way out with her friends.
Palembang, south Sumatra / 2008

While many pribumi or “indigenous” Indonesians who are hostile to the suggestion that they may have Chinese blood from their forefathers, the extended family of Kiagus Mohammad Idris (b. 1933) -- which numbers to the thousands -- claim ancestry to three Ming captains who fled to Palembang at the fall of the dynasty in mid-17th century. Although the claim is unlikely to be historically true and that the family now considers itself as pribumi (“indigenous”), some family members do look “Chinese” while the more informed ones are quite happy to talk about their Chinese ancestors. Nowadays, many of their descendants live at 3 Ulu (upstream) in Palembang. “When the Dutch were still around, they were fearful of us because they knew we are descendents from Chinese Muslims and that we are very strong Muslims,” recalls Idris, a ninth-generation member of the family.

Born in 1957, Kemas Achmad Solo is a member of this extended family. He makes a living selling pempek (Palembangese speciality -- a mixture of sago, fish and seasonings that is made into balls and deep fried or grilled). Due to his features, many people address him as “kor,” which means “brother” in Hokkien, even though he is pribumi. He is seen in his house at 3 Ulu.
During the Chinese New Year, Chandra Nadi, otherwise known as Soei Goeat Kiong, is full of pilgrims visiting the Chinese temple. Established in 1733, it was originally dedicated to Matsu. Venerated as the goddess of the sea, Matsu is widely worshiped in Southeast Asia and the coastal areas of Southeast China. Located at the 10 Ulu area, Soei Goeat Kiong is one of the oldest Chinese temples in Palembang. In his book titled "The Boat and the City" (2004), Johannes Widodo — an Indonesian researcher studying the morphology of Southeast Asian cities — noted that there is a tomb of a Chinese Muslim navigator behind the temple's main altar. Pork is prohibited as a sign of respect to the kramat (holy place).

Today is the 13th day of the Lunar New Year and there is still a constant stream of non-Muslim Chinese visiting the temple and the grave. Naturally, not all of them are aware that the tomb belongs to a Chinese Muslim. Muslims usually visit the tomb during Islamic holidays. According to a volunteer at the temple, the name of the Chinese Muslim is Xu Yunqing. Once, a medium summoned his spirit and the Chinese Muslim introduced himself as a deity by the name of Dabozilong.
Merawang, Bangka Island / 2008

A Hakha Chinese born on Bangka Island, Djie Khi Sian (b. 1958, 何其先, in grey) stopped school at 11 and started helping out the construction workers by the following year. He has been a builder since 15 and in 2006, due to his age and deteriorating health, Djie started a small tin-mining company with Confucius believer Suhartono (吴孟术) for US$2,000. Their mine is located at Merawang, halfway between Sungailiat and Pangkal Pinang. They employ two to six pribumi or "indigenous" workers, depending on the workload and the company’s financial status.

Djie learnt a lot about tin-mining from his China-born grandfather. Djie’s father worked in a government-owned tin mine until 1965, when he was suddenly dismissed alongside other Chinese miners, possibly in an attempt to clamp down the communists. He then became a farmer. Apart from running the tin mine, he also works as a collector, buying tin from the miners and selling it back to the government. Originally a Confucius believer, Djie converted to Islam in 2005 when he married a Javanese woman by the name of Sulistiani (b. 1968).

Due to his work, Djie seldom performs the prayers. In fact, he doesn’t feel comfortable to pray in the mosque amongst other Muslims. Like other miners, he is also not adverse to alcohol. Sulistiani is more understanding, saying that it takes time for him to convert into Islam.

The rainy season, which occurs at the turn of the year, has slowed down the process of looking for tin. Djie is seen putting his carpentry skills to good use as he tries to construct a new sump.
Mentok, Bangka Island / 2008

Born in 1976, Abang Faizal is the owner of Menumbing Restaurant at Mentok bus terminal, which is located right beside the harbour. He is also the 12th generation descendant of Chinese Muslim Lim Tin Kian, whose sons are credited for developing Mentok, the oldest town on Bangka Island. Abdul Jabar, one of Lim’s sons, served as the first ruler of the town. According to Faizal’s family history, Lim was a Ming dynasty official who married a princess of the court. Both of them fled to Johor, where they were received by its sultan. After converting to Islam, Lim adopted the name of Ce Wan Abdulhayat. They had five Chinese sons, including Abdul Jabar. Jabar’s daughter married Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin I (1724-57), ruler of Palembang.

In her book “Bangka Tin and Mentok Pepper: Chinese Settlement on an Indonesian Island” (1992), historian Mary F. Somers-Heidhues noted that even today Lim’s descendants continue to use the Johor titles of “Abang” and, for women, “Yang.” By Faizal’s estimation, there are more than 1,000 Abangs and Yongs in west Bangka alone. Not all of them are as forthright as Faizal’s family in terms of acknowledging their Chinese origin.

Back in his family home at Kampung Hulu, formerly known as Kampung Pemuhun, one of the three original villages of Mentok, Faizal’s father has preserved an old copy of the family tree, which traces their ancestry to Lim. Unlike the Chinese, the people of Mentok don’t normally maintain genealogies of their families.
Mentok, Bangka Island / 2008

Famous for otak-otak Tenggiri (mackerel fish cake in banana leaves) and empek-empek (Palembang speciality made from sago, fish and seasoning), Menumbing Restaurant was actually given to Faizal for free by its previous Chinese owner, who even taught him the recipes. That has perplexed some of the second-generation Javanese and Madurese, whose parents moved to Bangka Island as part of the transmigration programme to relocate people away from densely populated Java. They can't entertain the idea that a pribumi ("indigenous" Indonesian) like Faizal can enjoy such a good relationship with the Chinese.

“I didn’t work for the Chinese owner but he is aware of Lim Tau Kian and my family history. We actually have the same interests at heart. We hope that the people in Bangka will eventually better themselves,” says Faizal.

Faizal is seen making empek-empek in the kitchen with one of his helpers.
Jakarta, west Java / 2007

Formerly a Confucius believer, Marlina (黄美英; b. 1980) studied about Islam while studying in government-run junior and senior high schools on Bangka Island. Before she passed away in 2007, Marlina’s grandmother would always remind her to continue praying to the Goddess of Mercy even after her death. She had maintained an altar at home dedicated to the deity. But Marlina’s quest to find the meaning of her existence eventually convinced her that the answer is Islam. That realization came after a long process of research. She converted in 1999 when she left home to study English Literature in a university at Bogor, west Java. At that time, she stayed with her uncle Suyanto Sofyan, who was already a convert, at Cibinong, not far from Bogor. He converted before his marriage to a Sundanese lady.

Naturally, Marlina kept the conversion away from her grandmother. Today, her Hakka parents continue to be Confucius believers. Her father Bong A Khon (黄亚看) is a retired pepper farmer and her mother Lian Sian Fung (练仙风) rears pigs behind their Sungailiat house. Despite their upbringing, they are quite modern, especially in their willingness to send Marlina for tertiary education. When they knew of her conversion, their concern was limited to her health during the fasting month and whether she would marry a pribumi or “indigenous” man. Marlina has since married a Chinese Muslim man whom she met at Masjid Lautze.

Marlina is seen teaching English at a tuition centre in a high-class residential area. The Chinese Muslim has seven students at the centre — one of them is this six-year-old boy who is constantly listless and distracted. Marlina has to use games and creative activities to teach him effectively.
Marlina is very lucky to have such understanding parents.

“She is already an adult. We can’t control anymore. Nowadays, most young Chinese are Christians or Muslims anyway. You can’t expect them to offer incense at our altars when we die,” says her father Bong A Khon.

Marlina has returned to her family home at Sungailiat for the one-year death anniversary of her grandmother. Marlina is seen joining in the rituals with her paternal uncles and aunts as a sign of respect to her parents and grandmother. Many of her uncles and aunts are Christians and Catholics too. It shows that religious harmony is the norm rather than the exception in Indonesia.
Born in Jakarta, Haji Muhammad Ali Karim Oei (黄成省; b. 1956) is the son of Abdul Karim Oei Tjeng Hien (黄清兴; 1905–88), one of the most important Chinese Muslim leaders of his generation. The latter was the founder of Persatuan Islam Tionghoa Indonesia (Indonesian Chinese Muslim Association, or PITI).

The Haji Karim Oei Foundation was founded in 1988, partly to commemorate the passing of the leader. “At that time, the racial problem between the Chinese and the pribumi (‘indigenous’ Indonesians) was very acute. The root of the issue is religion,” recalls Ali Karim Oei, founder vice-chairman.

“In the Philippines, there is no racial issue because the Chinese believe in the majority religion – likewise for Thailand. By then, PITI was dominated by the pribumi. So we started the foundation, not necessarily to convert the Indonesian Chinese, but to educate them about the fact that Islam is also our ancestor’s religion,” adds Oei, who works as a lobbyist and helps to bring in investment funds from the Middle East to Indonesia.

The foundation’s activities usually take place in its mosque at Jalan Lautze. Established around 1990, Masjid Lautze (老子清真寺) is the only mosque in Jakarta to be administered by Chinese Muslims. Thus far, the foundation has converted some 2,000 Indonesians – 90 percent of whom are Chinese.

Oei is seen taking a call in the office of his cousin, who is the dealer of Acer laptops in Jakarta. Even though she is a Catholic, they get along very well.
In the seminal “The Han Family of East Java – Entrepreneurship and Politics (18th-19th Centuries),” French historian Claudine Salmon wrote of a certain Han Siong Kong (1673-1743) who was born in Tianbao (天宝), Fujian Province, and arrived in Lasem around 1700. Of his five sons, Tjien Kong, otherwise known as Soero Pernollo (1720-1776), converted to Islam. That was the start of the Javanese Han branch of the family, which quickly merged into the local elite. For instance, Han Siong Kong’s grandson Han Sam Kong (1752-1833), otherwise known as Adipati Soeroadinegoro, served successively as the Regent of Malang, Sidayu, and finally Tuban (1809-1818) in east Java. His son Raden Panderman (b. 1778) became the Adipati of Puger (1794-1804).

Once the leading fashion photographer in Jakarta, Mohamad Firman Ichsan is apparently the sixth-generation descendant of Raden Panderman. His grandfather Raden Mas Adipati Arto Notohamidjojo was the Regent of Kendal, central Java. Firman’s father Raden Mas Ichsan served as the national secretary of Sukarno. Born in 1953, the photographer has been brought up as a Javanese and sees himself as a nominal Muslim.

“The Javanese used to be proud of the fact that the island was a melting pot of some of the oldest cultures in the world. They were keen to stress that they had Chinese, Indian or Arabic blood. That was their source of superiority,” explains Firman Ichsan.

Recalling his days as a child, Firman adds: “My father had a lot of Chinese friends. Most of them were intellectuals, not businessmen. They would converse amongst themselves in Dutch. Berbahasa Indonesia was the third language my father learnt – after court Javanese and Dutch.”
Nobody in Indonesia is not Chinese," says the late president Abdurrahman Wahid (1940 - 2009; in batik), referring to the long history of intermarriages between the country's indigenous peoples and the Chinese settlers. Popularly known as Gus Dur, Wahid claims ancestry from Tan Kim Han (陈金汉), a Chinese Muslim of Fujian Province during the Ming dynasty.

In Wahid's account, the last Majapahit king Brawijaya V had a Muslim concubine of Chinese ancestry from Cambodia, otherwise known as Putri Champa in the 18th-century Javanese Book of Tales. She gave birth to two children, Tan Eng Hoat and Tan A Lock. The latter married Tan Kim Han, who was then an ambassador of China at Majapahit. In his 2007 thesis titled "Culture Contact and its Impact on China and Southeast Asia with Special Reference to Chang Ho's Voyages", Tan Ta Sen reported on the "discovery" of a genealogy of Tan Kim Han in China on September 2003. Born in 1383 during the reign of Hongwu, Tan Kim Han taught in a prefectural school in Leizhou after he had passed a village-level mandarin examination in 1405. Possibly in 1417, Tan accompanied Chang Ho to Lambri in Indonesia and thereafter lost contact with his family.

This Saturday morning, Wahid is seen at Komunitas Utan Kayu, an arts and cultural centre in Jakarta, recording his weekly talk show -- "Kongkow Bareng Gus Dur" -- for Green Radio FM89.2. Incidentally, "kongkow" (讲古) is a Hokkien loanword which means "talking about the past". He is talking about the relationship between Islam and democracy.
Locals believe that Sunan Gunung Jati, founder of Cirebon, west Java, in the 16th century and one of the nine mythical saints believed to have brought Islam to Java, took a Ming princess by the name of Ong Tin as his second wife. In “The Putri China and Their Daughters”, Myra Sidharta referred to the Babad Cirebon (Chronicles of Cirebon) and reported that one of the daughters of the Chinese emperor fell in love with a member of a foreign mission who had come to Beijing to pay tribute in the late 15th century. The daughter followed the future Sunan Gunung Jati back to Cirebon. The tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati is decorated with Ming porcelain plates embedded on its walls. The graveyard also has many Ming jars and urns, which contain water that devotees use for wudu (ritual ablution).
According to its caretaker, Talang Temple was built in 1450 as a mosque named after Tan Sam Cai. By 1635, the mosque was converted into a Confucian temple. Originally published as an appendix to M.O. Parlindungan’s book “Tuanku Rao” (1964), the controversial “Malay Annals of Semarang and Cirebon” tells a different story. The Hanafite Chinese Muslims established a mosque at Talang as early as 1415. By the end of the 15th century, it had become a Chinese temple. Tan Sam Cai, a renegade Muslim who served as finance minister with the title of Tumenggung Aria Wiracula, was a 16th-century personage. Nowadays, he is venerated as a deity at the Talang Temple. However, the fieldwork of French historian Claudine Salmon shows that the minister actually passed away in 1739 based on a stone inscription in his private cemetery.

Interestingly, entry to the Talang Temple is from the east while its sanctuary faces the direction of Mecca, which makes it possible for the temple to be previously used as a mosque. Apart from a few Chinese who pray there on the first and 15th day of the Chinese lunar month, Talang Temple is no longer as busy as before. However, on four evenings each week, a group of Cirebon residents -- most of whom Chinese -- will gather at the temple to practise Pangu Shengong (盘古神功), a simplified form of qigong. A simple halal dinner is served at the end of each session.
Mohammad Iman (b. 1948), or Ong Kim Leng, used to be a firm believer of Sam Kauw, a mixture of three “Chinese” strands of beliefs. Iman’s Chinese grandfather married a native lady while his father married a Chinese wife. One day, Iman broke the head of the Dabogong statue that he kept at home. While mending the statue, Iman wondered why the deity could do nothing about his broken head. That was when he first had doubts about the religion. After his marriage in 1973, he and his wife didn’t have a religion. As each Indonesian is required to specify his or her religion on the identity card, Iman and his wife decided to adopt the Catholic faith. However, he didn’t feel comfortable with the idea of trinity. At the same time, Iman started dreaming of himself praying with other Muslims. He converted to Islam in 1993.

When his wife Liliyanti, or Cie Un Djian, first saw him conduct the Islamic prayer, the Chinese lady cried. She felt betrayed because they had adopted the Catholic faith together. However, when she realized that Islam has not changed Iman all that much and that he has not forced her to convert, Cie has become more accepting. In fact, she promises to convert if he can buy her a house. They live in a rented house in a low-cost residential area at Sumber, some 30 minutes’ drive from the town centre of Cirebon. The annual rent of his house is US$100. He needs US$4,000 to buy a house in the area. The family runs a small grocery stall in front of the rented house and it is hard to see how Iman will ever afford a house.

Apart from the stall, Iman tries to visit his Muslim neighbours in the evenings to preach the word of Allah. On Sundays, Iman often has appointments to teach elderly villagers to read the Arabic Koran at their homes. He is not paid for the religious “work”. Instead, his service is dedicated to Allah.
Before becoming a Muslim, Thelingsing was already well respected by the Kudus people for his strength and charisma," says H. Sayuti Nafi, leader of the Indonesian Chinese Muslim Association (PITI, 印尼中华伊斯兰教联合会) in Kudus. Born in Kudus, the Javanese is well acquainted with the myths and legends surrounding the arrival of Islam to the city, which was founded in the 1540s by Sunan Kudus, one of the nine mythical saints believed to have brought Islam to Java. "For many years, he worked as a teacher and one of his students would become the future Sunan Kudus. One thing that he taught Sunan Kudus was ethics," explains Nafi. "In any case, when Thelingsing realized he had not learnt anything new from his work after a few years, he asked Sunan Kudus to teach him about Islam. Thelingsing would eventually become a Muslim and go on to establish two mosques around Kudus. The kyai (Islamic teacher) is also credited for introducing a certain woodcarving technique to the city."

While he agrees with most of Nafi’s account, Haji Munawir — caretaker of Thelingsing’s tomb in Kudus — insists that the kyai had an Arabic father and a Chinese mother. If that’s the case, why is he not remembered by his Arabic title? Munawir also adds that Thelingsing was a member of Cheng Ho’s crew.

The caretaker is seen praying to the holy tomb.
Salatiga, central Java / 2007

Started on Ramadan 2006, construction of the Mutiara Hati Beriman Pesantren (Koran learning centre) has been temporarily stopped due to the onset of the 2007 fasting month and a lack of funds. The mosque is the brainchild of Iskandar Abdurrahman.

Abdurrahman (b. 1965), or Thio Yit Po, was born in Lampung, Sumatra, to a Hakka Chinese father and a Sundanese mother from Cirebon, west Java. His father was a Christian reverend who converted to Islam when Abdurrahman was ten after learning more about the religion. Abdurrahman converted in 1985 and went on the hajj in 1997. His Bachelor degree was in Islamic Education. His Master was in Development Studies. To support himself, he came to Salatiga, central Java, in 1985 to work in a textile factory. Over the years, while he was in charge of quality control at the factory, his work as a kyai (religious teacher) grew. He eventually decided to build the pesantren.

The mosque is designed like a pagoda because he wants to remind the believers that they should learn and adopt different perspectives on religious and societal issues. It is also to illustrate the fact that there is Islamic architecture from China, says Abdurrahman. The mosque has five floors, referencing the five pillars of Islam. Apart from imparting religious knowledge, Abdurrahman hopes to incorporate lessons on business communication and entrepreneurship in his pesantren.

At around 7pm, residents around the mosque are seen performing Tarawih (non-obligatory evening prayers during the fasting month) led by the Islamic teacher.
Salatiga, central Java / 2008

With the passing of another year, construction of the Mutiara Hati Beriman Pesantren (Koran learning centre) has made further progress. Toilet facilities and one storey of guestrooms have already been built. Foundations for the upper floors of the pagoda-style mosque and classrooms for the santri (students of Islamic schools) have also been put in place. With construction starting on Ramadan 2006, the pesantren has thus far received grants of 220 million rupiah (about US$23,400) from both the governments of Salatiga and Semarang, says Abdurrahman (in white), founder of the school. However, a major part of the construction expenditure continues to come from the bookshop he runs and his dakwah (religious proselytizing) work — the latter of which has grown tremendously since 2007.

On the 13th day of Ramadan 2008, the Islamic school plays host to a programme initiated by the newspaper “Suara Merdeka”, introducing elements of journalism to the santri from different pesantren in Salatiga.

At the end of a hectic day, having taken a shower at home, Abdurrahman is seen back at the mosque for Tadarus (taking turns to recite the Koran, often performed during the fasting month). While there are teachers who work at his pesantren, Abdurrahman feels that the demarcation between teachers and students is always fluid. In his Islamic centre, it is more important for those who know certain things to educate those who don’t. At the end of the recital, the kyai (Islamic teacher) is seen taking a rest at the mosque.
When he married his Javanese wife Suwarti in 1994, Ren Bieng Young, or Agung Jukifli Mohamad, (kneeling down) converted into Islam. Born in 1969 at Surabaya, Agung grew up in Padang, Sumatra. He is now teaching Indonesian at a senior high school in Tuban and Mandarin at a junior high school. Even so, his command of Mandarin is really basic. “I was not interested to learn Mandarin from my father because I'm born in Indonesia, because I live here, because I work here, and I will eventually die here,” says the Chinese Muslim. “I feel pribumi (‘indigenous’ Indonesian).”

In 1998, Agung founded TK Muslimat Erlisia-Zulkifli, an Islamic kindergarten named after her daughter in a village of Tuban. Suwarti is the principal of the kindergarten. Sometime in 2002, the pribumi residents wanted to destroy the kindergarten for reasons not entirely clear to Agung. Perhaps they were jealous of his “success” as an outsider running a kindergarten in their village. Maybe they were not convinced that a Chinese could provide an Islamic education. Naming the school after his elder daughter Erlisia made things worse because her name sounded too “Christian” to the mob. Thankfully, the local government intervened and damage was prevented. The incident has clearly scarred Agung’s life. At that time, Agung even contemplated converting back to Christianity. He would ask his wife to cook pork and eat with him. Sometimes, he would even hit her with a wooden cross. But she resisted, eventually winning him over.

On this year’s Idul Adha (festival at the end of the hajj pilgrimage), Agung is seen visiting her mother-in-law (standing) who lives alone in a village at Grabagan district. The teacher is asking for repentance. It is in this living room that he married Suwarti.
A marketing diploma graduate from a private institute in Singapore, Ivan Sasongko (left; b. 1961) started working for his brother-in-law who owned a coffee factory in Surabaya, east Java, when he returned to Indonesia. In 1989, Sasongko was sent to Makassar to set up a branch office. Two years later, Sasongko met a pribumi or “indigenous” Indonesian lady who would become his wife in 1993. Following the wish of her father, Sasongko converted into Islam. A Confucius believer, Sasongko's mother was shocked initially but accepted the news eventually. His siblings accepted his decision without fuss, as they had also converted from Confucius faith to Catholicism through marriage.

Ironically, some of the pribumi and non-Muslim Chinese actually see the new Islamic converts in the same negative light. “They convert because they want political power or a big contract. If not, they convert because of security,” laments Sasongko, who is now a supplier of graphic materials. According to Sasongko, there are Chinese Muslims who have suffered for their conversion. Some have been forced out of the family. And when they die, some of them, including well-known Chinese Muslim leaders, are buried in non-Islamic way by their surviving family members.

Interestingly, the experience of his eldest son, enrolled in a school run by Muhammadiyah (second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia led by reformist leaders), suggests that conversion does not equate acceptance. Because he looks “Chinese”, the classmates often made fun of him. Only when Sasongko and his wife lodged a complaint did the situation improve.

Sasongko is seen driving home after picking up his third son (right) from a friend’s house.
Muslims from different ethnic groups gather at Masjid Cheng Hoo to perform Sholat Jumat (Friday prayers). Inaugurated on 28 May 2003, it is the only mosque in Indonesia to be named after a Chinese Muslim. Its architecture is inspired by the Niu Jie Mosque in Beijing, which was built in 996 AD. Masjid Cheng Hoo is the brainchild of Bambang Sujanto, or Lioe Ming Yen (柳民源; b. 1947). Sujanto raised the first installment of US$50,000 to construct the mosque by publishing “Juz Amma”, a chapter from the Koran, in Arabic, Mandarin and Berhása Indonesia. At that time, it was still not allowed to publish books in Mandarin. Sujanto was interrogated for three days and released.

Architecturally, Masjid Cheng Hoo is ripe with symbolism that articulates Sujanto’s ideas of ethnicity and religion. The mosque measures 11m by 9m. Its length approximates the length of two sides of the modern-day Ka‘bah in Mecca. The number ‘nine’ refers to the Wali Songo in Indonesia. The pagoda-top of the mosque has eight sides and the number ‘eight’ is considered highly auspicious amongst the Chinese. At the same time, the octagon structure references the spider web outside the cave that protected the Prophet and Abu Bakr during their flight to Medina. A mural of Admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho) beside the mosque serves to remind the believers that Chinese and Islam are not mutually exclusive categories. Initially, Muhammadiyah — the second largest Islamic organization in Indonesia founded by reformist leaders — was opposed to the idea, fearing that the Muslims would start praying to the idol. But Sujanto insisted, saying that Zheng He should be seen as a role model who arrived in Indonesia 600 years back to propagate Islam.
Iiv Febriana (b. 1983) performs Sholat Dzuhur, one of the five mandatory Islamic prayers, before lunch. Even though she was born into a Muslim family, the Sino-Javanese girl didn’t know much about Islam when she was young. Her Chinese mother Ngiau Yam Fa even sent her to a Christian play group so that she could participate in wholesome activities. Iiv learnt about Islam when she was in high school. At that time, her brother was very active in the school’s Islamic club. He became her greatest source of religious knowledge.

Febriana’s father Mochammad Koesnan plays guitar in a band that performs regularly at the hotels of Surabaya. Like most rock musicians, Koesnan doesn’t like regulations. As such, he is not a strict Muslim.

On the other hand, her mother converted to Islam when she married Koesnan. Before that, she used to be a Catholic. At first, her mother used to mix up the religious rituals, shares Iiv Febriana. “In any case, religion is more like a ritual to her. It doesn’t come from her heart. However, my parents are my treasure in this world and I worship them very much.”
“Ageng Pinatih always told the villagers that, as a human and a Muslim, everyone is the same – there’s no difference between a Chinese, an Arab or a Javanese,” explains Muchtar Djamil, head of the holy graveyard caretakers in Gresik. After her death, the place where Pinatih lived in Gresik was given the name of Kampong Kebungson, which is derived from the word “pesuson”. It means “to give milk”. By implication, the word refers to “the mother who cares”, thereby commemorating the role the Chinese Muslim played as the foster-mother of Sunan Giri, one of the nine Islamic saints believed to have brought Islam to Java. Sunan Giri probably reigned in the early 16th century. In “Chinese Element in the Islamization of Southeast Asia”, Tan Yeok Seong identifies Pinatih as Shih Ta Niang (施大娘), daughter of Shih Chin-ch’ing (施进卿), who was apparently appointed governor of Palembang in 1407. After her father’s demise, Pinatih went to Gresik and was appointed harbourmaster. Nyai Ageng Pinatih was also credited for spreading Islam in this part of Gresik. Djamil continues: “When she was alive, she owned about 150 ships. Forefathers of the people now living in Kampong Kebungson probably served as sailors on her ships. She brought the villagers out of this country to see the world.” Her tomb in the village has become a kramat (holy place).

Residents of Kebungson and the neighbouring villages are seen catching up amongst themselves after sending their kids to TK Muslimat-I, a kindergarten established at the village by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in 1962.
Malang, east Java / 2007

Growing up in Jakarta, Tan Mei Hwa (陈美花; b. 1968), or Ida Astuti, lived in a household of mixed religious faiths. Her father was a Confucius believer while her mother was a Catholic. In 1986, after reading about Islam on her own, Tan converted. She then started studying under a kyai (Islamic teacher) until 24. At that time, she was doing her formal education in Surabaya, east Java. When her parents heard the news, they told her never to come back. Tan started explaining the religion to them, convincing them that Islam is the same as other faiths. By 1988, they had accepted her conversion. They would become Muslims ten years later.

In 2003, Tan went on the hajj.

She started her dakwah (religious proselytizing) work in 1992. By 2000, it has become her fulltime profession. The nyai (female Islamic teacher) has been invited to speak in Indonesia, Holland and HK. Her eventual plan is to build a pesantren (Islamic school of Koranic studies for children and young people, most of whom are boarders).

Her dakwah sessions are often interspersed with jokes, as Tan has always liked to make people laugh since her childhood days. And yet, her sessions are often very moving. It is quite common for her audience to break down when she leads the prayers.

Tan is seen talking about Islam at Haji Muhammad Anton’s inauguration as the Malang branch leader of Indonesian Chinese Moslem Association (PITI) in 2007. She was talking about the role that Chinese Muslims played in bringing Islam to Java, an idea that was not entertained during the reign of Suharto.
The history of Chinese settlers in Pasongsongan is imperfectly known. Located on the western bank of an inlet right beside the Java Sea, Kampung Lebak is one of the oldest villages in Pasongsongan. There is a Kampung Peranakan (originally used to refer to Chinese Muslims but now used to mean local-born Chinese) some 150m away from the coastline but it is of less antiquity. Ibnu Suaidi (b. 1955), a resident of Kampung Peranakan, tells a confused story that links his family to Keng Biang Seng, one of the first Chinese settlers of Pasongsongan. He was one of four Hokkien brothers who fled to Indonesia when the Mongols attacked China. Keng Biang Seng ended up in Sulawesi where he married a Bone princess and converted into Islam. After the princess had passed away, Keng and his son left Bone and eventually settled down in Pasongsongan. That was the start of the Peranakan Muslim community in Pasongsongan. It is obviously impossible for Suaidi’s ancestors to have arrived in Madura during the 13th century. He further conflates his family history by claiming that his father’s house at Kampung Peranakan, which features an Arabic inscription dating its construction in 1847, was built by Suaidi’s great-grandfather Keng Ah Mei. The latter was a grandson of Keng Biang Siang. The house is now occupied by Suaidi’s father K. Siradjudin (b. 1929).

Suaidi’s maternal auntie Ummul Hairiya lives next door in a 1930s house. She is from Tamedung Village in Batang-batang District, where Keng Biang Seng was buried.
Pasongsongan, Madura Island / 2009

It is likely that Ibnu Suaidi’s ancestors arrived in Pasongsongan during the 18th century. There are Islamic tombs of more than 150 years old in Suaidi’s family cemetery at Makam Peranakan along Jalan Utama, a short distance from Kampung Peranakan. According to Suaidi, his ancestors first built Chinese-style houses at Kampung Lebak, creating a Pacinan [Chinese quarter] within the village. After making money, they moved to Kampung Peranakan.

Apparently, Suaidi’s ancestors were merchants who traded timber and rice in Madura, Sulawesi and Taiwan. The family business ended with the passing of his grandfather in 1958 when he was around 70.

Unlike Peranakan Muslims in other parts of Indonesia, the Confucian revival and rezinification movement that started at the end of the 19th century didn’t have a significant impact on Suaidi’s family. At the same time, his family did not become pribumi (“indigenous” Indonesians) unlike some Chinese Muslims who married “native” Muslims. In fact, until his father’s generation, family members were not allowed to marry pribumi. That restriction ended with Suaidi, who married Mulyani, a pribumi from Solo. This is why the Peranakan in Pasongsongan, which amounts to around 120 villagers, have mostly become Ibnu’s relatives through intermarriages within families.
As a third-generation Chinese, Zhuang Wubin (b. 1978; Singapore) uses photography to understand the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia (ASEAN).

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