

SMOOTH SAILING TO SAVE HAVEN OF ISLAM A Study of Chinese Descendants Converting to Islam in Watan Soppeng

Muhammad Hamdar Arraiyah | National Research and Innovation Agency
(BRIN) – Indonesia

Barsihannor and Gustia Tahir | UIN Alauddin Makassar – Indonesia

Corresponding author: barsihannor@uin-alauddin.ac.id

Abstract: Contrary to what happened elsewhere in Indonesia, conversion of Chinese descents to Islam in Wattan Soppeng is considered peaceful and more numerous. While religious conversions sometimes followed by family disputes and often breakup, this article shows the gradual and peaceful conversion to Islam of the Chinese in Watan Soppeng. It also uncovers the origin of the Chinese conversion to Islam, the motives, and the relationship between Chinese Muslim converts and local indigenous people. This study applied three methods to obtain data and information, namely in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation studies. The data and information obtained were verified, classified, integrated, and described. The research results show that the conversion process began in the 1950s and has been lasting for approximately seventy years. This conversion was caused by some reasons, namely the interest in Islamic teachings, the motive of marriage, and the self-awareness to convert to Islam. So far, the native Chinese have maintained good relations with the local Bugis community. Those who embraced Islam enjoyed more intensive social interactions.

Keywords: Chinese Muslim, conversion to Islam, Chinese descendants, Watan Soppeng.

Introduction

Chinese Muslims have become part of the inhabitants of Indonesia (Nusantara) for several centuries. Some writers said that their presence started in the fifteenth century. Al-Qurtuby pointed at the naval expedition of Admiral Cheng Ho (Zeng Ho) to Indonesia as one of his

arguments. Cheng Ho visited many cities, like Semarang, Surabaya, Banten, and Palembang from 1405-1433 during the Ming Dynasty of China. The admiral was accompanied by many people who had different professions. These included an imam from the mosque of Sin An (Changan), Has San. One of their missions was to spread the Islamic religion in the places they visited.¹

In the fourth expedition of Cheng Ho to the South Seas (1413-1415), he witnessed the presence of Chinese Muslim communities in East Java. They lived together with other Muslims, and native inhabitants.² However, the number of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia remains low.³ the shortage of manpower saw massive migration of chinese migrants to the archipelago which took place during Dutch colonial period in the 16th and 17th Century.⁴ Many of Chinese early migrants believed that Indonesia is their nation, including those chinese Muslims.⁵ This fact, though is less represented in Indonesian history.⁶

Although there are Chinese Muslims in te country, most Chinese people in this country are Buddhists,⁷ Christians,⁸ and Confucianists.⁹

¹ Sumanto Al Qurtuby, "The Tao of Islam: Cheng Ho and the Legacy of Chinese Muslims in Pre-Modern Java," *Studia Islamika* 16, no. 1 (2009): 51–78.

² Denys Lombard and Claudine Salmon, "Islam and Chineseness," *Program* 57, no. August (2010): 115–131.

³ Jesslyn Giovanni Mulyanto, "A Contested Identity: Contemporary Representation of Indonesian Chinese-Muslims on Instagram," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik* 26, no. 1 (2022): 98–117.

⁴ Yotes, Tommy, "Chinese Indonesians and the New Chinese Migrants in Indonesia," in Elvis Nshom (ed.), *Research Handbook on Communication and Prejudice* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2024), 436 - 437

⁵ Achmad Muhibin Zuhri, Winarto Wahyudi, & Abdulloh Hamid, "Chinese Muslims' Ways of Being Nationalist: Combining Islamic Cosmopolitanism, Acculturation and Social Roles," *QIJS (Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies)* 9 (2021), 279.

⁶ Achmad Ubaedillah, "The Minority and the State: Chinese Muslims in the Modern History of Indonesia," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 61, no 1 (2023), 107-136.

⁷ Yulianti, "The Birth of Buddhist Organizations in Modern Indonesia, 1900–1959," *Religions* 13, 3 (2022), 1-2

⁸ Wahidah Zein Br Siregar, "Zhong Yong and Moderation of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia," *Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education (TURCOMAT)* 12, no. 2 (2021): 646–656.

⁹ Susy Ong, "Ethnic Chinese Religions: Some Recent Developments, in Ethnic chinese in contemporary Indonesia," edited by Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 107-110.

Therefore, from the viewpoint of beliefs and real condition, Chinese Muslims are regarded as a minority among Chinese descents in Indonesia. Religious conversion among Chinese people faced many challenges. Religious conversion sometimes became a source of family disputes.¹⁰ Many cases showed that parents became unhappy when their child or children converted to Islam. Custody and other related legal issues should also be well considered in the conversion process.¹¹ In many cases, Chinese person or people who converted to Islam would be negatively stigmatized by other Chinese people in the related neighborhoods. Chinese people in Indonesia regarded Islam as a religion for foolish people.¹² They said that Islam is the religion of indigenous people of this country.¹³ Many of them considered Muslims as poor and uneducated people. They noticed that Muslims were characterized by deterioration, laziness, slums, coercion, and violence.¹⁴

Nowadays, the view of the Chinese in Indonesia on Islam tends to be more favorable, although the influx of Chinese migrant workers in recent years marris the situation a bit.¹⁵ The rise of China as the economic superpower also brings of Chinese investment to Indonesia.¹⁶ Mahfud reported that around thirty Chinese descendants convert to Islam in Surabaya every year. At this time there are approximately seven hundred Muslim Chinese converts in Surabaya. The number is likely to more and more increase.¹⁷ Those who

¹⁰ Arafat Noor, "Konflik Interpersonal Pasca Konversi Agama Di Kalangan Muallaf," *Al Hikmah: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 10, no. 1 (2020): 40–60.

¹¹ Nasaruddin Mera et al., "Child Custody Rights for Mothers of Different Religions: Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah Perspective on Islamic Family Law in Indonesia," *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 8 (2024), 1645.

¹² Zainal Abidin, "Chinese Muslim Predicament in Indonesia's Post Reformation," *Heritage of Nusantara* (2014).

¹³ Afithanul Afif, *Identitas Tionghoa Muslim Indonesia: Pergulatan Mencari Jati Diri* (Depok: Kepik, 2012).

¹⁴ Nirtafitri Trianisa, "Resiliensi Pada Keturunan Tionghoa Yang Melakukan Konversi Agama Ke Islam," *Jurnal Psikologi Pendidikan dan Pengembangan SDM* 9, no. 1 (2020): 53–73.

¹⁵ Yotes, "Chinese Indonesians and the New Chinese Migrants in Indonesia, 436 - 448

¹⁶ M. Iqbal et al., "Does Omnibus Law Affect the Indonesian Investment Regulations towards Chinese Investors?," *Volksgeist: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum Dan Konstitusi* 5, 2 (2022), 179–197.

¹⁷ Choirul Mahfud, "Chinese Muslim Development in Contemporary Indonesia: Experience of PITI in East Java," *Studi Islamika* 25, no. 3 (2018): 471–502.

converted to Islam involved some prominent Chinese persons in Indonesia. For example (a) the Late Junus Jahja (Law Chuan Tho), he was an intellectual, and (b) The Late Haji Masagung (Tjio Wie Tay), a businessman.¹⁸ At present, some of the Chinese who converts become popular Muslim preachers, one of them is Felix Siau.¹⁹ Their conversion to Islam brought more positive images of this religion among the Chinese ethnic group members in this country.²⁰

Noviza explained that the contributing factors of conversion are interpersonal relationships, advice from close friends, liberation from inner pressure, loneliness, and lack of cognition from friends and families.²¹ Noviza explained further by describing the conversion to Islam among congregations of the Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque of Palembang was due to psychological and social reasons.

Many Chinese persons converted to Islam because they were impressed by the teachings of this religion, like Islamic teachings on equality among mankind.²² This kind of religious experience is usually expressed by those who have high social positions or elite ones. The other causing factor was marriage. The conversion was also influenced by social conditions dominated by Muslims.²³ Men and women usually meet their spouses in their neighborhoods. Indeed, many motives and reasons behind Chinese descents conversion to Islam.²⁴ Certainly, da'wa mission by Muslim preachers contribute significantly to the conversion of Chinese descents to Islam.²⁵

¹⁸ Afif, *Identitas Tionghoa Muslim Indonesia: Pergulatan Mencari Jati Diri*.

¹⁹ Mulyanto, "A Contested Identity, 98-117.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

²¹ Neny Noviza, "Penggunaan Bibliotherapy Dalam Membantu Penyesuaian Diri Pada Mualaf Tionghoa Masjid Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Palembang," *Intizar* 21, no. 2 (2015): 185–200.

²² Afif, *Identitas Tionghoa Muslim Indonesia: Pergulatan Mencari Jati Diri*.

²³ Rakhmat Hidayat and Dessita Putri Sherina, "Konversi Agama di Kalangan Etnis Tionghoa: Motivasi, Adaptasi Dan Konsekuensi," *Hayula: Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Islamic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2020): 19–40.

²⁴ Wiwik Setiyani and Muktafi, "The Resilience of Muslim Converts in Understanding Islam: The Role of Al-Akbar Mosque for Post-Conversion Accompaniment," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 10, no. 2 (2020): 302–324.

²⁵ Nurjanah, "Serving as a Role Model: Historical Perspectives on Muhammadiyah's Multicultural Da'wa Towards Chinese Indonesians, 1960–1970," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 18, no 2 (2024), p. 558-578.

Some of the above contributing factors are found in the religious conversion of Chinese Muslims in Watan Soppeng. In this regard, this study explains the specific things related to those factors. This research shows the role of the converts to get to know Islam, the condition of their families, and the local community who respect differences in religious beliefs and provide support for the process of conversion that has taken place peacefully from generation to generation during seven decades. After all, research on Chinese Muslims in Watan Soppeng has not received much attention. This research is considered important because the number of Chinese Muslims is still small and receives little attention from local religious teachers. Amid limited special religious guidance, they maintain their faith as Muslims and lead their children and grandchildren to become Muslims, too. It is because when they do convert to Islam, they usually study and observe Islam seriously.²⁶

To collect data and information, in-depth interview is applied by visiting homes and working places of the selected informants. Researchers also to observe the activities of the informants and learn more about their families and Islamic symbols they put in their homes. Another method was a documentation study. The data were verified, classified, integrated, and described. Data analysis was guided by previous research findings or relevant theories.

Religious conversion refers to the change of belief from one religion or belief to another one. In a more detailed explanation, religious conversion is a process that leads to the acceptance of a religious attitude that could take place gradually or suddenly. It is not constituted by one motive, but a variety of motives. In such a case, there might be a change in terms of goals, values, attitudes, beliefs, and identity.²⁷

Adherents of Religions in Watan Soppeng

Almost the entire population of Soppeng Regency belongs to the Bugis ethnic group. Residents communicate in the local language in their daily activities. The population of other ethnic groups is very small.²⁸ Among them are Javanese. Several families from this ethnic

²⁶ I. Machali et al., "Informal Islamic Education for Minority Muslims: Lessons from Chinese Ethnic Minority Muslims in Yogyakarta," *Ulumuna* 27, no. 2 (2023), 598-623.

²⁷ Raja Oloan Tumanggor, "The Conversion of Religion in Psychological Perspective," *ASLAN Conference* (2016): 836-844.

²⁸ BPS Kab. Soppeng, *Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Soppeng* (Soppeng, 2022).

group run restaurants. Some Javanese families have lived in the town for decades, but some others are new migrants.

More than 99 percent of the population of Soppeng Regency embrace Islam. According to 2021 data from the Soppeng Population and Civil Registration Office, there are 238,146 Muslims (99.66%), Christians 711 (0.30%), Catholics 100 (0.04%), Hindus 2 (0.00083%), and Buddhists 8 (0.00334%). In this regency, there are still many villages whose entire population adheres to Islam. In addition, there is one district where the entire population adheres to Islam, namely Citta District. Villages or sub-districts inhabited by residents of various religions are mainly located in the capital of Soppeng Regency.²⁹

Adherents of Christianity in general are migrants and their descendants. Among them are civil servants assigned to this area. In addition, migrants from Tana Toraja generally adhere to Christianity. Some of them work in the field of agriculture and informal sectors, such as shoemakers. The migrants and their descendants were the main supporters of the Christian community in the area. Many of them live in the Lappa Cabbu neighborhood, on the southern outskirts of the town of Watan Soppeng. A part of Lappa Cabbu belongs to Botto Sub-District (Kelurahan) and the other part belongs to Lemba Village (Desa).

In the 1950s Christian missionaries who came to Soppeng succeeded in making a number of Soppeng natives from the Bugis tribe convert to Christianity. At that time, few soldiers from Java Island assigned to Soppeng were Christians. They were instructed to restore security from disturbances caused by members of DI/TII (Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia) or Country of Islam/Soldiers of Islam of Indonesia. The rebellion of DI/TII lasted around ten years in the region. According to Taha, it stopped in February 1965. During the time, residents of South Sulawesi felt serious security issue in which many people became victims of uprising.³⁰

Those who converted to become Christians and Catholics were generally poor Chinese descents. Their only motive of conversion is food staple provided by missionaries, which in those days was not easy to come by. Admittedly, the uprising of DI/TII caused disruption of economic condition. In following years, when situation got better,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Zainuddin Taha, *Memoar Prof. Dr. H. Zainuddin Taha: Perjalanan Hidup, Karier, dan Pemikiran Setengah Abad Mendidik Anak Bangsa* (Makassar: Berkah Utami, 2007).

some of those who converted and their descendants returned to their original religion, Islam. Others remained Christians or Catholics. Nowadays, most of the Christians and Catholics in Soppeng Regency live in the districts of Lalabata, Mario Riawo, and Liliraja. Christians widened their influence through formal and non-formal educational institutions. Christians in Watan Soppeng managed a Christian Elementary School on Jalan Kesatria. This school has existed since the 1960s. Some Chinese families sent their children to the Christian elementary school. Others enrolled their children in a non-formal religious educational institution of the Catholic church. Their children attended public elementary schools and studied Catholicism in the church to get scores for their study reports.

Catholics have one church in Watan Soppeng. It is located in the Botto Sub-District, in the southern part of the city. Meanwhile, Christians have three churches. All of them are in the Botto Sub-District, too. One of them is Patra Church. This church is visited by several members of its congregation from Chinese ethnicity. One other church is marked with a Torajan ethnic identity. Like the situation in Malang Town, religious minority groups here do not face any violence from the local government or community.³¹

The Origin of Chinese Muslim Converts in Soppeng (1950-1960s)

According to Ruslan, it was in 1950s that a Chinese man who converted to Islam in Watan Soppeng for the first time. His name was Lu Nyeng who was born in China. He belonged to *Cina Totok* (full-blooded or pure-blood Chinese). He used to live in Bila Sub-District in the capital of Soppeng and acted as the leader of the Chinese inhabitants in Soppeng. Lu Nyeng had a bicycle workshop and known as a skillful martial artist.³²

Lu Nyeng married a Bugis woman. Her name was Bundu, a Muslim girl born in religious family where her mother was a teacher of the Qur'an. People in the village and her grandchildren called her Nene Ngolo. Lu Nyeng and Bundu had four children. Their children belonged to *Cina Peranakan* (mixed-blooded Chinese or half-blood Chinese). They were Si Wang, Hasni, Abdul Rashid (Ci Cu), and Hasan. All of them adhered to Islam. One of them (Abd. Rasyid or Ci

³¹ Asfa Widiyanto et al., "Religious Minority and Peaceful Coexistence: The Dynamics of the Ahmadiyya Community in Malang, Indonesia," *Ulumuna* 28, no. 1 (2024): 50–80.

³² Ruslan, "In-Dept Interview," 2023.

Cu) migrated to Java. Lu Nyeng was not popular among many people in Watan Soppeng, because he had left the town for several years. He felt that the situation was not safe for him during the DII/TII uprising in South Sulawesi. Finally, he lived at Sempange Village, Tana Sitolo District, Wajo Regency. He passed away in this village and buried at Lappa Cabbu Islamic Cemetery of Watan Soppeng.

Si Wang who worked as a photographer had also left Watan Soppeng for some years before he returned due to the unfavorable situation during military incursion caused by DII/TII uprising in South Sulawesi. This family showed a good devotion. They performed prayers regularly, recited the Holy Qur'an and some Islamic books such as *Fadhailul Amal*. Si Wang's brother, Hasan, became a member of Jamaah Tablig, meanwhile, Si Wang's sister, Hasni ran a business in photography (Remaja Photo Studio) in Watan Soppeng. Hasni married a Chinese man and got two children. All of them adhered to Islam although Mrs. Hasni's husband was buried in a Confucian tradition.³³

In the 1960s, according to Mahyuddin, a Chinese woman converted to Islam. She came from Bone Regency and conducted a beauty salon business. Her business location was adjacent to the MPS (Private Electricity Company) activities, which supplies electricity in the town of Watan Soppeng. This company has been replaced by PLN (Perusahaan Listrik Negara) (State Electricity Company). The Chinese woman was called A Chi. Starting from marriage, A Chi who was a Confucian became a Muslim before having married a Bugis Muslim (Mahyuddin) who worked at the MPS office. A Chi had five siblings. Some of them embraced Christianity and some others followed Catholicism. Her siblings lived in other places, namely Makassar and Papua. A Chi was a widow who had three children when she married Mahyuddin. Two of her children followed her decision to adhere Islam and the other one followed Confucianism. However, his son (grandson of A Chi) eventually embraced Islam.³⁴

The case showed that Islam gradually gains a place in the hearts of many Chinese people in Watan Soppeng. Marital factors and family relationships, as mentioned by Hidayat and Sherina show a clear influence on Chinese conversion to Islam. People of Chinese descent in Watan Soppeng in the 1960s almost all adhered to religions other than Islam. Some of them adhered the Confucian religion. They

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ H. Victor Mahyuddin, "In-Dept Interview," 2023.

adhered the religion of their parents. Some were Christians and others were Catholics. Mr. Mahyuddin and Mrs. A Chi had two sons who both are Muslims. Their two sons had gone to Mekkah for hajj pilgrimage and actively performed the five pillars of Islam. They used to perform congregational prayers in the Darussalam Grand Mosque of Watan Soppeng.

Chinese Inhabitants in Watan Soppeng

Some historians stated that there were Chinese people at Somba Opu (Makassar) in the first part of the seventeenth century.³⁵ They became part of foreign traders from different countries who domiciled in the capital of Gowa Kingdom. At that time Somba Opu played its role as an important trade city in the eastern part of the Nusantara. The description of people of Chinese descent in Watan Soppeng in this paper started from the 1960s up to now. It was based on explanations given by some residents who experienced the situation. Though, it is estimated that the Chinese people in Watan Soppeng had existed long before 1960. It was marked by the presence of Chinese necropolises in the Salotungo neighborhood, on the eastern outskirts of the town of Watan Soppeng. Dozens of tombs were in the cemetery in the past. The old necropolises of the Chinese people in that place have all been evicted.

Chinese descents used to run a school until the second half of the 1960s. However, shortly after the G30S/PKI coup in 1965, the Chinese School, as residents called it, in Watan Soppeng stopped operating because of negative sentiments against the Chinese descents following the coup. The permanent building of the school was taken over by the local government. Nowadays, the school building is occupied by Lemba State Elementary School.

Chinese people in this town in the 1960s often communicated among themselves in their mother tongue. Some called it Hokkien. Some of them didn't speak Indonesian. They appeared clearly as foreigners. According to Jacobsen, most of the Chinese in Indonesia came from Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan provinces in southeast China. The main languages group in the areas were Hokkien,

³⁵ Anthony Ried, *Pluralism and Progress in Seventeenth-Century Makassar* (Leiden: EJ. Brill, 2000).

Teochieus, Cantonese, Hainanese, and Hakka.³⁶ However, some decades ago, the Chinese who run the shop in Watan Soppeng communicated with their customers in Indonesian or the Bugis language. Though, they occasionally spoke among themselves in their mother tongue. At present, the current generation of Chinese descendants rarely uses Hokkien. Some of them said that they no longer know the language. They speak Indonesian and the Bugis language fluently. It is a kind of way they integrate with the locals. In other words, they adjust themselves to their surroundings.³⁷ The Chinese people in Watan Soppeng have settled around the old market since the 1960s. Their houses as well as places of business spread on the four sides of the market. The buildings are located on Jalan Samudera in the north, Jalan Attang Benteng in the south, Jalan Kalino in the west, and Jalan Pasar in the east. Some other shops are on Jalan Kemakmuran. The situation has not changed.

The names of Chinese merchants in Watan Soppeng in the 1960s that were widely known, among others were: (1) Ho Seang (Miscellaneous Merchandise Store), (2) Nyi Hin (Coffee Shop), (3) Owner of Cahaya Baru Store, (4) A Weng (New Asia Store), (5) A Teng (Coffee Shop), (6) Yu Liong (Coffee Shop), (7) Ta Shim (Coffee Shop), (8) A Chi (Beauty Salon), (9) Nam Ing (Shoe Store), (10) A Liong (Shirt and Shoe Store), (11) A Seng (Sports Equipment Store), (12) Father of A Huang (Gold Shop), (13) A King (Gold Shop), (14) Hollan (Motorcycle Workshop), (15) Saplong (Cosmetic Store), (16) A Chong (Building Materials Store), and (17) Owner of Ompo Restaurant.³⁸ Some of these business activities are continued by their children or grandchildren. Some others have transformed into other business fields. At present, there are about thirty shops of Chinese family descent. This number includes those who married indigenous people. Some of the Soppeng-born Chinese moved to other cities, such as Makassar. On the contrary, some others come from other regions. In the 1960s most of the Chinese people in Watan Soppeng were legally considered foreigners. Some decades later, they chose to

³⁶ Michael Jacobsen, "Islam and Processes of Minorisation among Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia: Oscillating between Faith and Political Economic Expediency," *Asian Ethnicity* 6, no. 2 (2006): 71–87.

³⁷ Hariman Surya Siregar, Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, and Hajrullah, "Islamic Religious Learning for Muallaf At Pesantren," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 6, no. 2 (2020): 165–178.

³⁸ Idil, "In-Dept Interview," 2023.

become citizens of the Republic of Indonesia. The change of status made them easier to run their economic activities.³⁹

Good relations between people of Chinese descent and indigenous people can be seen in the field of sports. In the 1970s the Indonesian Football Association of Soppeng (GASIS) had one or two skillful players of Chinese descent. Among them, was A Chong. The same thing could be seen on the badminton court. Some Chinese descents became members of this sport association like Lu Kung. Some Chinese men are known as agile basketball players. Among them were Nam Ing and Cheng Kho. They often served as referees at basketball games.

Motives of Religious Conversion

Conversion motives are numerous, from curiosity, marriage, economic and social. The first factor, as mentioned before by Afif, is due to an interest in Islam. This was experienced by informant named A Huang who was born in 1952. The name written on his identity card is Lierwan. His house is located on Jalan Kemakmuran that also serves as a place to trade gold. A Huang did not know his father's religion, but his mother was a Buddhist. His parents gave their children the freedom to choose religion. A Huang chose Islam. His brother A Feng adheres to Christianity, A Seng adheres to Buddhism, but A Seng's children embrace Islam, namely Uli (girl) and Tyson (boy). Both are devout Muslims. A Huang became a Muslim when he graduated from elementary school. When he was in elementary school, he attended Islamic Religious Education subjects delivered by Mrs. Salehah. After graduating from elementary school, in 1968 he was circumcised as a sign of converting to Islam. He converted to Islam not because he wanted to marry a Muslim woman, but due to his interest in Islamic teachings. According to him, he never studied any religion other than Islam. Islam is attached to his heart since childhood. In his youth A Huang often went to Bone to visit his grandmother. There he often heard people reciting the Koran.⁴⁰

His grandfather then married a Bugis woman in the village of Pattojo. The location is about nine kilometers from Watan Soppeng. Because of that, A Huang also often visited this village. Here he met a woman named Nurlaela who later became his wife. From that marriage, he had four children. All of them follow the religion of

³⁹ Afif, *Identitas Tionghoa Muslim Indonesia: Pergulatan Mencari Jati Diri*.

⁴⁰ A Huang, "In-Dept Interview" (2023).

Islam. His love for Islam is growing and growing. A Huang requested his wife to perform the pilgrimage in 2018. He also registered to perform the pilgrimage in 2009, however, the plan could not be realized due to the family's poor economic conditions. Even so, he had performed Umrah in 2016. A Huang obtained additional religious knowledge informally. He often visited several community leaders from the nobility and religious leaders. He listened to the messages they conveyed. Among the religious experts he often meets is Ibrahim Mannosi. According to him, Ibrahim's method of conveying religious messages is very simple and easily understood.⁴¹

The second factor was marriage. The reason relates to social condition as mentioned above by Hidayat and Sherina. It was experienced by Lu Kang. Lu Kang was born in Soppeng in 1966. As a child he lived with his parents on Jalan Kalino. His parents ran a shop selling a variety of goods, such as shirts and shoes. The shop faced a row of stalls on the western edge of the old market. His father embraced Confucian religion, then converted to Christianity. His mother embraced Confucian religion. At first Lu Kang followed his father to embrace Christianity. Lu Kang completed his education at a Christian Elementary School located on Jalan Kesatria Watan Soppeng. In this school there is a church that is located right facing the main road. He also completed his junior and senior high school education at Watan Soppeng. He avidly followed the subject of Christian Religious Education. After that, he continued his education at Paulus Indonesia Christian University in Makassar, although he did not have time to finish his studies.

At the time he was in the university, he met a Muslim woman. Her name is Rini. They got in a serious relationship more than two years before getting married. Before getting married, Lu Kang converted to Islam (1991). The conversion experienced by Lu Kang can be understood as a self-determination, not due to outside forces of the person concerned.⁴² Most of the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia did the conversion seriously.⁴³ His older brother named Lu Neng also converted to Islam before marrying a Muslim woman born from Soppeng. Lu Neng and his family live in Soppeng and manage a shop for a living.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Tumanggor, "The Conversion of Religion in Psychological Perspective."

⁴³ Afif, *Identitas Tionghoa Muslim Indonesia: Pergulatan Mencari Jati Diri*.

Lu Kang had four children, two boys and two girls. All of them are Muslims. He now also has six grandchildren. All of them are Muslims. Lu Kang learns more about religion through social media such as on YouTube. As a convert, he feels that some of the religious messages conveyed through the media have not shown the same orientation and pattern.⁴⁴ He feels that the model for conveying these messages has not been fully supported by what is termed prophetic journalism. This reporting model, as stated by Pradana, seeks to disseminate information and news using language that is more friendly, polite, peaceful, soothing, and dialogic.⁴⁵ Lu Kang's interest in studying Islam continues to increase. For the last ten years he has been fasting for one full month of Ramadan every year. Previously, he still often missed a few days of fasting in the month of Ramadan. At first, it was hard for him to fast. He is strongly encouraged by his wife, social environment, and he feels the benefits of fasting from a health perspective. Lu Kang also pleased his wife to perform the pilgrimage, his children were given the space and opportunity to grow into devout adherents of Islam.⁴⁶

The third factor is the self-awareness to convert to Islam as adult. This reason relates to the interest in the teachings of Islam. This was experienced by Kristina Suherman, who is usually called Chen-Chen. Kristina Suherman was born in Watan Soppeng in 1975. Her father is Hollan or Suherman, a motorcycle parts dealer. His father and mother are Chinese descents. His father adheres to Buddhism, while his mother adheres to Confucianism. Kristina's parents did not give her a Chinese name, obeying the New Order regime's policy of assimilation at that time.⁴⁷ The naming also seems to be part of the social adaptation efforts made by her father. He tried to adjust his families to their surroundings. It indicated that they knew their position. A minority should respect others to avoid conflict and build harmony⁴⁸ Hollan has a brother named A Yung. He adheres to the Islamic religion.

⁴⁴ Lu Kang, "In-Dept Interview" (2023).

⁴⁵ Rahmawati et al., "Chinese Ways of Being Good Muslim: From the Cheng Hoo Mosque to Islamic Education and Media Literacy," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 2 (2018): 225–252.

⁴⁶ Kang, "In-Dept Interview" (2023)

⁴⁷ May Thio & Linawati Sidarto, "Reclaiming of the heritage name by Peranakan Chinese in the Netherlands and their sense of belonging," *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 13 (2024), 393-409.

⁴⁸ Siregar, "Zhong Yong and Moderation of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia."

Kristina grew up in a family that gave her children the freedom to choose their religion as adults, but she leaned to Catholicism. Under these conditions, Kristina did not leave the classroom during the Islamic Religious Education lessons at the Elementary School (currently known as SDN 3 Lemba). The main factor is that she did not want to wait outside the classroom by herself if she skipped the class. To get Catholic education score, she attended classes lessons outside of school hours. She attended religious studies at the Catholic Church in the Masewali neighborhood, which was located near SMP Negeri 1 Watan Soppeng. He chose to study Catholic Religious Education, like the choice of many ethnic Chinese at that time. Thus, she had the opportunity to learn a lot about Catholicism. Her teacher at that time came from the Netherlands. His name, Leo Block, CE., CM.⁴⁹

Following her mother's advice, she should not choose a religion when she was young. Thus, at the time of adulthood she could choose the religion according to her wishes. After all, her parents did not direct him to become a follower of the religion according to their religion. While studying at SMP Negeri 1 Watan Soppeng, she also sat in class during Islamic Religious Education lessons. Thus, she had the opportunity to know more about the teachings of Islam. However, during high school she chose to leave when Islamic religion lessons took place in class.

In 1994, when she was nineteen years old, she decided to convert to Islam. She was led to recite *Shahadat* (the two declarations of Islamic faith) at a mosque on Jalan Tinumbu Makassar. At that time, she was still studying at the Department of Architecture at Hasanuddin University. She converted to Islam because she was interested in the activities of Muslim worship. According to her, Islam is very rational, the individual's relationship with God is very intense with the five daily prayers.⁵⁰ Kristina's interest in converting to religion is like what Haji Masagung (Tjio Wie Tay), a well-known businessman in Jakarta, experienced. In the 1970s, even though he was at the peak of his business success, he felt something was incomplete in his life. He once a Hindu. At the end of his search, he decided to convert to Islam

⁴⁹ Kristina Suherman, "In-Dept Interview," (2023).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

arguing that Islam is a religion that is more capable of giving him inner peace.⁵¹

After converting to Islam for about a year, Kristina Suherman married a Muslim man from Leworeng Village, Soppeng. Her husband is Andi Rudy, a Buginese person. From this marriage, she was blessed with two daughters. The first daughter married the son of a Muslim scholar who lived in West Sulawesi. One of her siblings named Yuliani also adheres to Islam. She converted to Islam when she was about to marry a young Muslim from Belawa. She lives in Depok. Her husband manages a foundation called the Pedesaan Mosque Foundation in Jakarta. This foundation distributes assistance from donors who donate land for the construction of mosques in rural areas. Kristina became a member of an Islamic study group centered in the Ujung area. It was about nine hundred meters from his residence so that she can continuously improve her knowledge on Islam.

Social Relationship among the Chinese Muslim

Community of Chinese descents in Watan Soppeng embrace religious differences among their members. There is a nuclear family whose members adhere to four different religions. The father is a Confucian, the mother is a Buddhist, two children are Muslims, and, one Christian child. At first, the Chinese inhabitants of Watan Soppeng mainly adhered to Confucianism and Buddhism. The teachings of the two religions have some similar aspects and their adherents also have close social relations. The relation can be seen in the Buddhist Tri Dharma School. This school integrates some aspects of three different religions embraced by Chinese people in Indonesia. They are Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. The Tri Dharma Buddhist School is followed by some Chinese people in Singkawang, West Kalimantan.⁵²

The influence of Christianity and Catholicism began spreading among the Chinese people in the town of Watan Soppeng starting 1960s. Few Chinese persons who originally adhered to Confucianism converted to Christianity. Some Chinese children began to convert from Confucianism to Christianity or Catholicism. Subsequently, Islam also began to have a place in the hearts of Chinese descents. Gradually

⁵¹ Afif, *Identitas Tionghoa Muslim Indonesia: Pergulatan Mencari Jati Diri*.

⁵² M. Hamdar Arraiyah, "Pengamalan Agama di Kalangan Pemuda Pada Sebuah Desa Wisata Di Singkawang," *Harmoni* 4, no. 14 (2005): p. 36–59.

one or two Chinese persons became Muslims. Thus, the religious diversity among Chinese descents became a norm.

The conversion to Islam practiced by several Chinese persons in Watan Soppeng did not cause any conflicts among the members of the Chinese community and families as well. This was underpinned by a number of factors. Among other things are that Chinese families in this town have a good religious moderation. In addition, religious conversion is seriously carried out by the concerned persons. Chinese descents have seen for a long time the friendly behavior of local Muslims. Apparently, they do not feel anxiety about the bad impacts of identity changes to Islam. The Chinese in Watan Soppeng attach importance to harmony among family members. The principle was maintained after they converted to Islam. Those who converted to Islam maintained good relations with their parents, siblings, and all their relatives. For example, Kristina Suherman occupies a two-story shophouse and two plots connected to each other. She lives there together with her Confucian mother. Her mother prepares bread at the coffee shop she runs herself. Meanwhile, Kristina runs a culinary business that serves online shoppers in another space. The harmony is in line with the Islamic teachings of Islam which emphasize the importance of good personal and social relations. Muslims are reminded to honor their parents even though they adhere to different religions.

In addition, Chinese Muslims in Watan Soppeng maintain a good relationship with the families of the husband and wife as well. One of the Chinese converts married a Bugis woman. Few of his wife's family who live in Makassar often stay at his house in Watan Soppeng during the Eid al-Fitr days. In this way, they feel the warmth of kinship based on the bond of religious belief on joyful days.⁵³ A Huang for example, a Chinese convert who married a woman from Pattojo Village in Soppeng Regency. He often visits his wife's relative's house in this village. He felt wholeheartedly accepted by his wife's relatives. The love and respect of the Muslim community in Watan Soppeng was increasingly felt by A Huang when his two daughters got married. Such intimate acceptance was also experienced by others Chinese converts

⁵³ Kang, "In-Dept Interview." (2023)

in other cities. They feel more accepted in the social environment of their new religion.⁵⁴

The social status of Chinese descents seems to be getting better. The conversion improves at least a cultural leverage.⁵⁵ This can be seen in marriages between ethnic Bugis and Chinese couples. One of the senior officials who once led the government in Soppeng is known to have a Chinese wife. His wife converted to Islam and became a devout follower of Islam. To be more intimate, the Chinese in Watan Soppeng speak Bugis fluently. Those who manage the shop usually serve their customers using the local language. Thus, shop owners and their customers display a close relationship. This is done consciously by Chinese businessmen. They have the view that relationships are necessary for business success. Chinese converts also used to speak polite religious expressions that were commonly used by the Bugis. When talking about a deceased Muslim friend, he uses the Bugis expression "*Leleni ri pammasena*" (That person has returned to the mercy of Allah Almighty). This means that the person has passed away.⁵⁶

Tumanggor said that people who experience religious conversion will experience changes related to goals of life, values, attitudes, beliefs, and identity ⁵⁷. Such a thing was pointed out by Kristina Suherman. She wears a hijab (veil) when she runs her business every day. It can be surmised through her clothes that she is a Muslim woman. Other converts, such as Tyson (a nickname) are widely known by locals as devoted Muslims because he sometimes goes to mosque. Social relations between Chinese Muslims and local indigenous Muslims are getting closer. For example, when a Chinese convert is about to perform the Hajj, he or she follows the local Muslim traditions. Many locals visit him or her before leaving and after performing the Hajj. Likewise, some ethnic Chinese converts facilitate their Bugis wives to perform the Hajj, even though they themselves have not performed the fifth pillar of Islam. In addition, some of these converts, such as Lu Neng, are known for their donations for religious purposes.

⁵⁴ Khaerul Umam Mohammad and Muhammad Syafiq, "Pengalaman Konversi Agama Pada Muallaf Tionghoa," *Character: Jurnal Penelitian Psikologi* 2, no. 3 (2014), pp. 1–9.

⁵⁵ Mulyanto, "A Contested Identity; Mulyadi, "Konversi Agama," *Jurnal Tarbiyah Al-Awlad, UIN Imam Bonjol Padang* 9, no. 1 (2019): pp. 29–36.

⁵⁶ A Huang, "In-Dept Interview" (2023)

⁵⁷ Tumanggor, "The Conversion of Religion in Psychological Perspective."

Conclusion

The Number of Chinese descents converting to Islam is abundant in Watan Soppeng. It is achieved gradually in decades. More importantly, the conversion did not leave any mark or stain in form of family disputes or breakups. Since it started about seventy years ago, the process has involved three generations. Back in 1960s, only one or two Chinese inhabitants of generation converted to Islam. After that, some people from the first generation who were not Muslim had children who converted to Islam. Furthermore, some second-generation people who were not Muslims had children who converted to Islam. Thus, about half of the Chinese families living in Watan Soppeng since the 1960s have children or grandchildren who follow Islam.

Some Chinese Muslims in Watan Soppeng converted to Islam before marrying their Muslim spouses. Some others converted to Islam after studying this religion and seeing the religious activities of their close Muslim friends. Their religious conversion is distinguished into three kinds. *First*, they came to know Islam when they were studying in elementary school and never studied another religion. *Second*, they had never studied Islam at all before converting. They studied their previous religion before conversion. *Third*, they studied Islam and other religions before converting. In short, their religious conversion is influenced by three main factors, namely interest in Islamic teachings, marriage, and self-awareness of adults to convert to Islam.

Chinese Muslim converts have good social relations with fellow Chinese descents. They also have good relations with fellow Muslims. Chinese converts in Watan Soppeng change their religious identity to their own intention. Correspondingly, there were no conflicts among the family. The Chinese people preserved their appreciation of religious differences. Those who become Muslims show a tolerant attitude. In addition, the acceptance and appreciation of Bugis Muslims to Chinese converts grow much better. []

References

Books and Articles

- Abidin, Zainal. "Chinese Muslim Predicament in Indonesia's Post Reformation". *Heritage of Nusantara* (2014).
- Afif, Afthanul. *Identitas Tionghoa Muslim Indonesia: Pergulatan Mencari Jati Diri* (Depok: Kepik, 2012).
- Al Qurtuby, Sumanto. "The Tao of Islam: Cheng Ho and the Legacy of Chinese Muslims in Pre-Modern Java". *Studia Islamika* 16, no. 1 (2009).
- Arraiyah, M. Hamdar. "Pengamalan Agama di Kalangan Pemuda Pada Sebuah Desa Wisata Di Singkawang". *Harmoni* 4, no. 14 (2005).
- BPS Kab. Soppeng. *Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Soppeng* (Soppeng, 2022).
- Elvis Nshom (ed.). *Research Handbook on Communication and Prejudice*. Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2024.
- Hidayat, Rakhmat and Dessita Putri Sherina. "Konversi Agama di Kalangan Etnis Tionghoa: Motivasi, Adaptasi Dan Konsekuensi". *Hayula: Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Islamic Studies* 4, no. 1 (2020).
- Iqbal, M. et al. "Does Omnibus Law Affect the Indonesian Investment Regulations towards Chinese Investors?". *Volksgeist: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum Dan Konstitusi* 5, no 2 (2022).
- Jacobsen, Michael. "Islam and Processes of Minorisation among Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia: Oscillating between Faith and Political Economic Expediency". *Asian Ethnicity* 6, no. 2 (2006).
- Lombard, Denys and Claudine Salmon. "Islam and Chineseness". *Program* 57, no. August (2010).
- I. Machali et al. "Informal Islamic Education for Minority Muslims: Lessons from Chinese Ethnic Minority Muslims in Yogyakarta". *Ulumuna* 27, no 2 (2023).

- Mahful, Choirul. “Chinese Muslim Development in Contemporary Indonesia: Experience of PITI in East Java”. *Studi Islamika* 25, no. 3 (2018).
- Mera, Nasaruddin et al. “Child Custody Rights for Mothers of Different Religions: Maqāṣid al-Sharī’ah Perspective on Islamic Family Law in Indonesia”. *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam* 8 (2024).
- Mohammad, Khaerul Umam and Muhammad Syafiq. “Pengalaman Konversi Agama Pada Muallaf Tionghoa”. *Character: Jurnal Penelitian Psikologi* 2, no. 3 (2014).
- Mulyadi. “Konversi Agama”. *Jurnal Tarbiyah Al-Awlad* 19, no. 1 (2019).
- Mulyanto, Giovanni Jesslyn. “A Contested Identity: Contemporary Representation of Indonesian Chinese-Muslims on Instagram”. *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik* 26, no 1 (2022).
- Noor, Arafat. “Konflik Interpersonal Pasca Konversi Agama Di Kalangan Muallaf”. *Al Hikmah: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 10, no. 1 (2020).
- Noviza, Neny. “Penggunaan Bibliotherapy Dalam Membantu Penyesuaian Diri Pada Muallaf Tionghoa Masjid Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Palembang”. *Intizar* 21, 2 (2015).
- Nurjanah. “Serving as a Role Model: Historical Perspectives on Muhammadiyah’s Multicultural Da’wa Towards Chinese Indonesians, 1960–1970”. *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 18, no 2 (2024).
- Ong, Susy. “Ethnic Chinese Religions: Some Recent Developments” in *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia* edited by Leo Suryadinata. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008.
- Rahmawati et al. “Chinese Ways of Being Good Muslim: From the Cheng Hoo Mosque to Islamic Education and Media Literacy”. *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8, no. 2 (2018).
- Ried, Anthony. *Pluralism and Progress in Seventeenth-Century Makassar*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000.
- Setiyani, Wiwik, and Muktafi. “The Resilience of Muslim Converts in Understanding Islam: The Role of Al-Akbar Mosque for Post-

- Conversion Accompaniment”. *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 10, no. 2 (2020).
- Siregar, Hariman Surya et al. “Islamic Religious Learning for Muallaf At Pesantren”. *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 6, no. 2 (2020).
- Siregar, Wahidah Zein Br. “Zhong Yong and Moderation of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia”. *Turkish Journal of Computer and Mathematics Education* 12, no. 2 (2021).
- Taha, Zainuddin. *Memoar Prof. Dr. H. Zainuddin Taha: Perjalanan Hidup, Karier, dan Pemikiran Setengah Abad Mendidik Anak Bangsa*. Makassar: Berkah Utami, 2007.
- Thio, May & Sidarto, Linawati. “Reclaiming of the heritage name by Peranakan Chinese in the Netherlands and their sense of belonging”. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 13 (2024).
- Trianisa, Nirtafitri. “Resiliensi Pada Keturunan Tionghoa yang Melakukan Konversi Agama ke Islam,” *Jurnal Psikologi Pendidikan dan Pengembangan SDM* 9, no. 1 (2020).
- Tumanggor, Raja Oloan. “The Conversion of Religion in Psychological Perspective,” *ASLAN Conference* (2016).
- Ubaedillah, Achmad. “The Minority and the State: Chinese Muslims in the Modern History of Indonesia”. *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 61, no 1 (2023).
- Widiyanto, Asfa et al. “Religious Minority and Peaceful Coexistence: The Dynamics of the Ahmadiyya Community in Malang, Indonesia”. *Ulumuna* 28, no. 1 (2024).
- Yotes, Tommy. “Chinese Indonesians and the New Chinese Migrants in Indonesia” in Elvis Nshom (ed.), *Research Handbook on Communication and Prejudice*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2024.
- Yulianti. “The Birth of Buddhist Organizations in Modern Indonesia, 1900–1959”. *Religions* 13 no 3 (2022).
- Zuhri, Achmad Muhibin., et al. “Chinese Muslims’ Ways of Being Nationalist: Combining Islamic Cosmopolitanism, Acculturation and Social Roles”. *QIJIS Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 9 (2021).

Interviews

A Huang, “In-Dept Interview” (2023).

H. Victor Mahyuddin, “In-Dept Interview,” 2023.

Idil, “In-Dept Interview,” 2023.

Kristina Suherman, “In-Dept Interview,” (2023).

Lu Kang, “In-Dept Interview” (2023).

Ruslan, “In-Dept Interview,” 2023.