

## **From Colonial Legacies to Contemporary Challenges: The Muslim Experience in Hong Kong and Macau**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the multifaceted challenges faced by the Muslim communities in Hong Kong and Macau, two cities characterized by their unique colonial histories and contemporary socio-economic dynamics. Despite the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom, Muslims in these regions encounter significant barriers to integration, including social prejudices, economic hardships, and limited access to educational resources. The objective of this research is to analyse these challenges and their implications for the Muslim population, utilizing a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative interviews with quantitative data analysis. The findings reveal a persistent cycle of poverty exacerbated by misconceptions about Islam and cultural differences, highlighting the urgent need for targeted government interventions and community engagement strategies. This research underscores the importance of fostering ethnic harmony and enhancing the visibility of Muslim contributions to society, ultimately recommending a collaborative approach involving local authorities, community leaders, and educational institutions to promote inclusivity and understanding.

**Keywords:** Muslim, Hong Kong, Macau, prejudice, society

### **Introduction**

Hong Kong and Macau, two prominent cities in East Asia, are home to predominantly Chinese populations, but their histories and socio-cultural landscapes have been shaped by distinct colonial influences. Historically, Hong Kong was under British colonial rule, while Macau was governed by the Portuguese, with the latter's rule spanning a significantly longer period. As a result, the colonial heritage in Macau is often considered more distinctive and deeply entrenched compared to that of Hong Kong, particularly in terms of cultural practices, governance, and social structures. This legacy has played a crucial role in shaping the contemporary identities of these two cities, influencing everything from their urban development to their economic systems.

In the 1970s, during the final decades of British colonial rule, Hong Kong underwent a profound transformation, evolving into a major global business hub. This period marked a significant shift in economic paradigms, coinciding with the global transition from Keynesian economics, which emphasized demand-side economic policies, to the adoption of trickle-down economics, a supply-side model that favoured deregulation, tax cuts for businesses, and market-driven growth. As noted by Stephen Castles and Alastair Davidson, this economic reorientation played a pivotal role in fostering modernization, increasing population mobility, and facilitating Hong Kong's integration into the global economy. The structural changes that took place during this period laid the foundation for the city's rise as a dynamic international financial centre.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Castles and Alastair Davidson (2000), *Citizenship and migration: globalization and the politics of belonging*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 5.

Moreover, the advancements in transportation and information technology, which gained momentum in the 1970s, further amplified Hong Kong's global connectivity. As Steve Tsang Yui-Sang (2004) argues, these technological innovations not only accelerated the movement of people and goods but also facilitated the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and capital across borders, contributing significantly to Hong Kong's continued growth as a cosmopolitan city.<sup>2</sup> The rapid pace of technological development has further enhanced population mobility, enabling Hong Kong to maintain its position as a key player in the global economy.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, Macau is internationally renowned for its thriving casino industry, which has become a central pillar of the region's economy. The Macau government, in collaboration with private casino operators, has capitalized on the economic potential of the gaming sector, reaping substantial profits that have fuelled tourism and bolstered related industries such as hospitality, transportation, and food services. The government's strategic promotion of Macau's rich cultural heritage has also played a significant role in attracting visitors, thus diversifying the city's economic base beyond the casino industry.

The influence of prominent figures such as Stanley Ho, a key player in the development of Macau's casino industry, cannot be overstated. Ho's family ((何鴻燊家族)) has had a profound impact on the region's political, economic, and social spheres, with their influence extending beyond Macau to Hong Kong, as reported by Mingjie Sheng and Chaolin Gu.<sup>4</sup> The Ho family's control over major casino operations has granted them substantial power, shaping the trajectory of Macau's development and its position in the global gaming market. The relationship between the political and economic elites in both Macau and Hong Kong is complex and intertwined, with significant implications for the social and economic landscapes of the region.

Turning to the broader historical context, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I marked a significant moment in the geopolitical reordering of the Middle East and Europe. Despite the fall of the empire, Muslims continued to seek better living conditions and opportunities in various parts of the world. Almost a century after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey, which succeeded the empire, is preparing to celebrate its centenary in 2023. This period of transition, which saw the reconfiguration of national borders and the redefinition of political identities, has had lasting implications for Muslim communities globally.

In particular, the Muslim populations in Hong Kong and Macau have faced unique challenges as they navigate life in cities that are not primarily Muslim. These challenges are compounded by their need to integrate into societies with distinct cultural, religious, and political frameworks. This study seeks to explore the experiences of Muslims in Hong Kong and Macau over the past century, examining the obstacles they have encountered in their efforts to assimilate into local communities, the societal biases they have faced, and their ability to uphold Islamic beliefs and practices in non-Islamic urban environments.

The aim of this research is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the diverse barriers that Muslims in Hong Kong and Macau have confronted, focusing on their social integration, the prevalence of discriminatory attitudes, and the impact of these factors on their religious practices. By investigating these dynamics, this study aims to offer valuable insights into the ongoing struggles faced by Muslim communities in non-Islamic societies and the strategies they have employed to maintain their cultural and religious identity while contributing to the broader social fabric. Through this examination, we hope to illuminate the complexities of minority group integration in globalized, multi-ethnic urban environments and contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and resilience of the Muslim community in East Asia.

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Tsang Yui-Sang (2004), *A modern history of Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: HKU Press, pp. 165-167.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Tsang Yui-Sang (2004), *A modern history of Hong Kong*, p. 167.

<sup>4</sup> Mingjie Sheng and Chaolin Gu, (2018), "Economic growth and development in Macau (1999-2016): the role of the booming gaming industry," *Cities*, Vol. 75, pp. 73-75.

## Islam in Hong Kong and Macau

The introduction of Islam to Hong Kong can be traced back to the mid-19th century, coinciding with the city's establishment as a British colony following the Opium War. In the aftermath of the war, Britain gained its first East Asian colony, and the subsequent Treaty of Beijing in 1860 significantly expanded Hong Kong's territorial boundaries to include the Kowloon Peninsula. This expansion was further reinforced in 1898, when the New Territories were added to the colony after a treaty was signed with Britain.<sup>5</sup> This period marked the beginning of Hong Kong's transformation into a thriving port city and the arrival of various migrant communities, including Muslims.

The historical presence of Muslims in Hong Kong before its official opening remains somewhat uncertain, yet early interactions between the region and the broader Islamic neighbourly can be inferred. Guangzhou, located along the Zhujiang River and the largest neighbouring city to Hong Kong, was a significant trading port during the Tang dynasty. The Tang government actively promoted maritime trade (市舶司) with foreign countries, which included the exchange of goods and cultural interactions with regions as far as the Arabian Peninsula and Central Asia.<sup>6</sup> During this period, Sulaiman At-Tajir documented the thriving Muslim population in Guangzhou and their prosperous business activities, contributing to the region's economic dynamism.<sup>7</sup> At that time, Hong Kong was still relatively underdeveloped and referred to as Tuen Mun town, with a modest population that primarily benefited from the import of ceramics, a thriving industry dating back to the Tang dynasty.<sup>8</sup>

Macau, established as a Portuguese settlement in 1553, predates Hong Kong's colonial foundation. The Portuguese sought to secure more profitable and sustainable maritime routes for their colonial enterprises, which led to the selection of Macau as a key port for trade. Following the fall of Portuguese colonial rule in Malacca in the 17th century, the Portuguese refocused their attention on developing economic and religious activities in Macau.<sup>9</sup> This focus on trade, alongside missionary efforts, contributed to the spread of Catholicism in the region. Like Hong Kong, however, the specific history of Muslim presence in Macau prior to the Ming dynasty remains unclear, though it is highly likely that Muslims had contact with the region due to its proximity to Guangzhou, a key node in early Islamic maritime trade routes dating back to the Tang dynasty.

Historically, the early interactions between Hong Kong and the Islamic world predominantly involved individuals from the Indian subcontinent, particularly Pakistan, which was part of the Mughal Empire before the British Raj's colonization. Additionally, Southeast Asia served as a significant intermediary in fostering these connections. During the Qing dynasty, piracy along China's coastal areas posed a considerable threat to the empire, prompting Emperor Jiaqing (嘉慶帝) to implement measures to address this issue, including dealing with notorious pirates such as Cheng I (鄭一) and Cheung Po Tsai (張保仔). At this time, Hong Kong had already gained a reputation as a haven for pirates.<sup>10</sup> In response, the British colonial administration in Hong Kong imported South Asian personnel, including Muslims from Pakistan, to serve in the police force, where they played an integral role in maintaining law and order in the region. The period of Islamization in Hong Kong coincided with the flourishing of maritime trade routes connecting Arabia, Persia, and the Malay world. This enhanced trade and migration between coastal China and Southeast Asia facilitated the arrival of Muslims from various regions, including Arabs, Persians, and Malays. These interactions contributed to the growth of Islamic presence in Hong Kong, with traders exchanging goods, particularly spices, textiles, and other luxury items, with local Chinese merchants.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Zhidong Hao (2011), *Macau history and society*, Macau: University of Macau, pp. 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> James D. Frankel (2021), *Islam in China*, Great Britain: I.B. Tauris, pp. 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Michael C. Howard (2014), *Transnationalism in ancient and medieval societies: the role of cross-border trade and travel*, McFarland Incorporated Publishers, p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> Mick Atha and Kennis Yip (2016), *Piecing together Sha Po: archaeological investigations and landscape reconstruction*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 90-91; Wong Sharon Wai-Yee (2017), "Rethinking storage jars found in the 9th to 20th centuries archaeological sites in Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macau," *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-orient*, Vol 103, p. 337.

<sup>9</sup> Zhidong Hao, (2011), *Macau history and society*, pp. 73-75. Barbara Watson Andaya (2016), *The globalization of Christianity in early modern southeast Asia, early modern southeast Asia 1350-1800*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 236.

<sup>10</sup> John Nguyet Erni and Yuk-Ming Leung (2014), *Understanding south Asian minorities in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: HKU Press, pp. 19-20.

<sup>11</sup> Paul O' Connor (2012), *Islam in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: HKU Press, p. 23.

Similarly, Macau's Islamic history is closely tied to Portuguese colonial activities in regions such as India and North Africa, alongside their extensive trade with Malays and Indonesians along the maritime route between Portugal and the Malay world. The Portuguese sought to establish a colonial foothold in East Asia, and while they faced competition from both the British and Dutch, Macau was strategically important as a trade hub linking East Asia with South Asia and the Malay Archipelago. The Portuguese not only saw Macau as an economic asset but also as a platform for the dissemination of Christianity and Catholicism.<sup>12</sup> The early Muslim presence in Macau, like that in Hong Kong, was likely facilitated by the region's geographical proximity to key Islamic trading centres in Southeast Asia and the broader Islamic world.

One of the earliest known interactions between Hong Kong and a Muslim leader occurred in 1846, involving Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin II of Brunei (who reigned from 1828-1852) and Pengiran Abdul Momin, later known as Sultan Abdul Momin (who reigned from 1852-1885). This diplomatic exchange was facilitated by Sir George Rodney Mundy, the Admiral of the Fleet in Hong Kong. The purpose of this encounter was to resolve a diplomatic issue regarding the cession of Labuan Island from Brunei to the British, marking the first known documented connection between Hong Kong and a Muslim leader.<sup>13</sup>

Macau's history of Islamic interactions similarly includes early contact with Muslim leaders. Sultan Muhammad Kanzul Alam of Brunei (ruling from 1807 to 1826) continued the policy of his half-brother, Sultan Muhammad Tajuddin, maintaining strong trading relations with regions such as Java, Singapore, and Macau. In 1795, Sultan Muhammad Kanzul Alam issued a decree reinforcing these trade ties, which were recorded in the *Silsilah Raja-Raja Brunei*.<sup>14</sup> This trade took place near Muara Bay in Brunei, close to Portuguese-controlled areas in Brunei Bay, further emphasizing the interconnection between the regions.<sup>15</sup>

As of recent estimates, Hong Kong's Muslim population stands at approximately 300,000, representing 4.0% of the total population. The largest groups within this community include Indonesians (150,000), Chinese Muslims (50,000), and Pakistanis (30,000), with the remaining Muslim residents likely comprising migrant workers and diplomatic staff (Hong Kong Government Statistics). The Muslim community in Macau is estimated to be around 10,000 individuals, although precise statistics are difficult to obtain as the Macao government does not publish specific data on the Muslim population. Using available information, it is estimated that approximately 1% of Macau's population is of Indonesian origin, equating to about 6,820 individuals. The remaining Muslim population consists of around 3,180 individuals, including Chinese Muslims and Pakistanis.<sup>16</sup>

The Muslim populations in both Hong Kong and Macau are primarily composed of descendants of early Muslim migrants, as well as newer arrivals, including migrant workers from Indonesia and Pakistan, and professionals working in diplomatic missions. The increased interconnectedness facilitated by advancements in information technology and globalization has fostered greater mobility, enabling more individuals to migrate for work or study opportunities. This heightened population mobility reflects broader trends observed globally, as migration becomes more accessible due to technological advancements and policy changes.<sup>17</sup> In the latter half of the 20th century, the implementation of a formal passport system further facilitated international mobility, balancing individuals' rights to work or study abroad with the need for national security. The opportunity for individuals to work or study overseas has been a significant motivator for migration, leading to greater cultural exchange and the formation of transnational communities.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Rogerio Miguel Puga (2013), *The British presence in Macau 1635-1793*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, pp. 55-56.

<sup>13</sup> Haji Awang Asbol bin Haji Mail and Haji Brahim bin Ampang Haji Tengah (2019), *Politics of the Brunei sultanate (1804-1906): enduring the storm to the blessed shores*, Brunei: Persatuan Sejarah Brunei, p. 60.

<sup>14</sup> Haji Awang Mohd Jamil Al-Sufr (2019), *Tarsilah Brunei: Wasilah ketakhtaan kesultanan Brunei tahun 1659-1828 Masihi*, Brunei: Pusat Sejarah Brunei, p. 105.

<sup>15</sup> Sweeney, P. A., (1968), "Silsilah raja-raja Berunai," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 41, No. 2, p. 73.

<sup>16</sup> Department of statistics and census service, Macao, (2024), retrieved on 28th July 2023 from <https://www.dsec.gov.mo/en-US/>; Nelson Moura (2022), "Freedom of religion largely respected in SAR-US state department," *Macau Business*, retrieved on 27th July 2023 from <https://www.macaubusiness.com/freedom-of-religion-respected-in-sar-albeit-some-national-security-restrictions-us-state-department/>.

<sup>17</sup> Chiara Formichi (2020), *Islam and Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> Mark B. Salter (2010), *Borders, passports and the global mobility, The Routledge international handbook of globalization process*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 517-518.

The economic development in Hong Kong and Macau since the 1990s has significantly improved living standards, allowing more families to hire domestic workers from Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. This trend has led to an increase in foreign workers, contributing to the growth of both economies. The average salary in Hong Kong rose from HK\$11,800 in 2000 to approximately HK\$17,000 in 2022, a trend also observed in Macau.<sup>19</sup> For example, the salaries of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong increased from HK\$3,860 in 1998 to HK\$4,730 in 2022.<sup>20</sup> The employment of foreign workers has played a crucial role in supporting the local economies of both cities, as these workers contribute to the labour force while indirectly fostering economic growth.

### **The Muslim experience in Hong Kong and Macau**

It is a well-known fact that individuals often experience homesickness when they choose to study or work abroad. For a Muslim person living in a non-Islamic country or city, whether for educational, professional, or migratory purposes, adjusting to a new environment can prove to be particularly challenging. This process is further complicated by feelings of alienation and homesickness, as well as heightened levels of anxiety. Muslims living abroad frequently encounter cognitive differences between their original culture and the new cultural environment. As a result, they may feel uncertain about the level of support they can expect from the local community.<sup>21</sup> Regarding the living situation of Muslims in Hong Kong and Macau, there are three primary concerns: maintaining an Islamic lifestyle, integrating with the local society, and confronting social prejudices directed at them.

#### ***Adherence to an Islamic lifestyle in Non-Islamic Cities***

Muslims residing in Hong Kong and Macau frequently grapple with the challenge of preserving their Islamic way of life in cities where Islam is not the dominant religion. The importance of adhering to Islamic principles is consistently emphasized in the Qur'an and Hadith, which stress that fulfilling religious obligations in this world will lead to a better fate in the afterlife, or *Akhirat*. This belief serves as a guiding force for Muslims, motivating them to continue practicing their faith despite living in non-Muslim environments.

In Hong Kong, there are seven mosques, with two of them standing out as particularly well-known within the community. Masjid Kowloon, located in Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon, predominantly serves speakers of Urdu, while Masjid Wan Chai, also known as Masjid Ammar, located in Wanchai on Hong Kong Island, primarily caters to those who speak Indonesian and Urdu. These mosques are central hubs for the Muslim community, providing a space for prayer and religious activities. In addition to these two, there are five other mosques: Masjid Jamia, the oldest mosque in Hong Kong, situated on Shelley Street in the Central District; Masjid Ibrahim in Yaumatei, Kowloon; Masjid Stanley in the South District of Hong Kong Island; Masjid Chai Wan in the East District of Hong Kong Island; and Masjid Ismail in Tung Chung on Lantau Island. Notably, Masjid Ismail is the only mosque located in the New Territories, making it an essential religious centre for Muslims in that region.

Macau, on the other hand, has the Macau Mosque and Cemetery, located in the northeastern part of the city, near a reservoir. This facility includes a prayer house and a Muslim cemetery, serving as a key focal point for the small Muslim population in the region. In addition to mosques, Hong Kong also hosts smaller prayer rooms and madrasas, which are often listed on the “Discovery Hong Kong” website. These madrasas offer Islamic education and organize religious events for the Muslim community. Some of these institutions also engage in public outreach, showcasing Islamic culture and practices to the broader population of Hong Kong.

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<sup>19</sup>Trading Economics (2023), “Trading Economic,” retrieved on 28th July 2023 from <https://tradingeconomics.com/macau/wages>.

<sup>20</sup> John Kang (2016), “Study reveals 95% of Filipino, Indonesian helpers in Hong Kong exploited or forced labor,” *Forbes*, retrieved on 28th July 2023 from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnkang/2016/03/18/study-reveals-95-of-filipino-indonesian-helpers-in-hong-kong-exploited-or-forced-labor/>; Helper Choice (2023), “Domestic helper salary and food allowance,” retrieved on 28th July 2023 from <https://www.helperchoice.com/c/domestic-helper/salary-food-allowance>.

<sup>21</sup> Talita Ferrara (2020), “Understanding homesickness: a review of the literature,” *Journal for leadership and instruction*, Vol. 19, No.1, pp. 10-13.

While the Basic Law in Hong Kong ensures religious freedom for all, including Muslims, residents frequently face difficulties in attending mosques due to the geographical distribution of religious facilities. Many Muslims, particularly those living in more remote areas, face significant challenges in accessing mosques due to the high costs and time required for travel. For example, while Pakistani Muslims generally have the freedom to choose between praying at home or attending the mosque, Indonesian migrant workers employed as caretakers may not enjoy the same flexibility. Their ability to practice Islam is often dependent on their employer's attitudes toward religious observance, and in cases where employers are unsympathetic, it can be difficult for these workers to maintain their religious practices in the workplace.

**Table 1: Indonesian and Pakistan population in Hong Kong in 2021**

<b>Population (people)</b>	<b>Hong Kong Island</b>	<b>Kowloon</b>	<b>New Territories</b>	<b>Total</b>
Indonesian	30779	40341	70945	142065
Pakistani	2379	7989	14017	24385

Recently, the Hong Kong government has made available information regarding the living conditions of ethnic minorities, particularly those from Pakistan and Indonesia. The data provided by the IDDS Census of 2021 highlights the disparities faced by these communities and is expected to serve as a foundation for further research and policy development aimed at improving their quality of life. According to the 2021 IDDS Census, the working population in Hong Kong stands at approximately 3,680,407, yet only 586,187 individuals are employed within the same district, and 375,286 can work from home.

This leaves around 2,718,934 people requiring long commutes, which results in high transportation costs. Indonesian Muslims earn less than HK\$5,000 per month on average, except for those employed in economically privileged households. According to the Equal Opportunities Commission's 2021 study, Pakistani Muslims earn an average of HK\$12,800 per month, although approximately 10,000 Pakistanis in Hong Kong live in poverty.<sup>22</sup>

The transportation systems in both Hong Kong and Macau are well-developed and generally accessible, with clear signage making it easy to locate mosques. However, the dispersed nature of the Muslim population, particularly those from Indonesia and Pakistan, creates a significant financial burden when traveling to religious sites. In Hong Kong, attending a mosque in Kowloon or on Hong Kong Island can require a return fare ranging from HK\$16 to HK\$50, making it unaffordable for many Muslims to attend daily prayers. In contrast, Muslims in Macau enjoy the advantage of lower transportation costs. The round-trip fare to the Macau Mosque from any district within the city is only about MOP\$12 to MOP\$24, and most areas in Macau, including the Macau peninsula, are walkable, allowing Muslims to save on transportation expenses. Consequently, Muslims in Macau are more fortunate in this regard compared to their counterparts in Hong Kong.

Another significant concern for Muslims living in Hong Kong and Macau is the availability of halal food. The Incorporated Trustees of the Islamic Community Fund of Hong Kong maintains a directory to help Muslims find halal restaurants, though many of these establishments are in Kowloon or on Hong Kong Island, particularly along Nathan Road and in Causeway Bay and Wanchai. These areas are in proximity to major mosques like Masjid Kowloon and Masjid Wan Chai. However, the high rental costs in these areas are often passed on to customers, leading to increased prices. Additionally, the New Territories has a lower concentration of halal restaurants, making it more difficult for Muslims living there to access halal food options.

In response to these challenges, the Muslim community in Hong Kong has been working with local restaurants to explore the inclusion of halal options in their menus. A notable example of this initiative is the fast-food chain KFC, which has certified five of its outlets as halal, with plans to expand this certification to additional locations in the future. In Macau, the halal food situation is somewhat more favourable, with

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<sup>22</sup> Jeff Pao (2021), "Tough pandemic times for Pakistanis in Hong Kong," *Asia Times*, retrieved on 29th July 2023 from <https://asiatimes.com/2021/05/tough-pandemic-times-for-pakistanis-in-hong-kong/>.

twelve halal restaurants, four of which are halal certified. These are distributed across the Macau Peninsula, Taipa, and Coloane, with the majority located in easily accessible areas.<sup>23</sup> In recent years, both Hong Kong and Macau have experienced inflation, particularly in rent prices. As a result, many Muslims living in these cities have turned to purchasing halal food products from supermarkets, relying on their own discretion to identify suitable items.

This practice is common among Muslims residing in non-Islamic regions, where halal food may not always be readily available in restaurants or markets. A unique challenge faced by Muslims working in Macau is the presence of the casino industry, which is central to the region's economy. Given that gambling is prohibited in Islam, many Muslims may find it difficult to reconcile working in Macau with their religious principles. Despite this, some Indonesians and Pakistanis may choose to work in Macau, believing that they can maintain their religious observances and principles even in a city renowned for its gambling industry. This presents a significant moral and religious dilemma, as Muslims working in Macau must navigate the tension between their professional duties and their religious beliefs.

### ***Integration of Muslims into the Local Society***

Muslims residing in non-Islamic cities or countries face numerous challenges in maintaining their cultural identity and integrating into the broader society, particularly in terms of language, education, and socio-economic mobility. These challenges are often compounded by issues such as poverty, exploitation, and limited access to educational resources. This is particularly evident in the context of Muslim migrant workers in Hong Kong and Macau, where the interplay of language barriers and educational limitations plays a central role in exacerbating the socio-economic struggles faced by these communities. In both Hong Kong and Macau, the poverty experienced by Muslim migrant workers is intricately linked to their challenges in acquiring adequate language skills and accessing quality education, which in turn affects their ability to integrate socially and economically.

In Hong Kong and Macau, a significant portion of the Muslim migrant workforce is comprised of Indonesian domestic workers, primarily engaged in homecare services for local families. These workers are typically responsible for providing care to elderly or disabled individuals, and their employment often confines them to private domestic spaces, limiting their interaction with the broader societal context. As a result, many Indonesian workers in Hong Kong and Macau have limited exposure to the larger social and economic structures of these cities, which restricts their understanding of the rights and opportunities available to them.

Additionally, these workers often face exploitation and mistreatment by their employers, who, taking advantage of their economic vulnerability, subject them to poor working conditions and inadequate compensation. Despite these challenges, many Indonesian workers choose to endure such mistreatment, driven by the need to maintain job security and provide for their families back home. This compromise, however, often comes at the expense of their physical and emotional well-being.

The economic hardship faced by Indonesian migrant workers can be attributed, in part, to the difficult socio-economic conditions in their home country. According to recent statistics, approximately 13.94 million people in Indonesia, specifically from regions such as Surabaya, Bandung, and Jakarta, live below the poverty line.<sup>24</sup> This poverty is exacerbated by limited access to education, with two-thirds of the population in these regions failing to progress beyond the middle school level.<sup>25</sup> As a result, many Indonesian workers lack the educational qualifications and social mobility that might allow them to secure better-paying jobs, either within Hong Kong and Macau or upon returning to Indonesia. Furthermore, their limited understanding of the importance of advocating for their rights in the workplace, due to the lack of education and awareness, makes them vulnerable to exploitation by their employers.

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<sup>23</sup> Macao SAR, (2005), *The historic monuments of Macao*, UNESCO.

<sup>24</sup> BPS-Statistics Indonesia (2022), "Number of people living below the poverty line in Indonesia as of September 2022," retrieved on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2023 from <https://www.bps.go.id/en/pressrelease/2023/01/16/2015/in-september-2022--the-poor-population-percentage-was-up-to-9-57-percent-.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Galen Lamphere-Englund (2020), *Indonesian migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong: a study into the challenges and opportunities for building resilience to online threats*, ICCT: Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism, pp. 10-11

To prepare these workers for their roles in Hong Kong and Macau, pre-occupational training is provided in Indonesia. This training often includes language instruction, particularly in Cantonese, as well as education on local cultural norms, homecare techniques, and basic rituals observed in Hong Kong and Macau. This preparation allows Indonesian workers to integrate relatively easily into the local workforce and interact with the broader community in a limited capacity. However, despite this training, the core issue remains: the workers are often not fully aware of the rights they are entitled to and are unable to navigate the complexities of a foreign work environment until they begin their employment. The lack of transparency regarding the work environment and employer expectations—especially prior to signing a contract—adds to the stress and uncertainty these workers face. This issue is starkly illustrated in the tragic case of Erwiana Sulistyarningsih, an Indonesian domestic worker who endured severe physical abuse at the hands of her employer, Law Wan-Tung (羅允彤). Her case became widely publicized, sparking outrage and drawing attention to the systemic exploitation of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong. While this case represents an extreme example, it is by no means isolated, and numerous other migrant workers face similar challenges.

One possible explanation for the vulnerability of these workers is the lack of stringent regulations and clear guidelines governing employer-employee relationships in the domestic work sector. Aaron Brooks suggests that another contributing factor to the exploitation of foreign workers is the lack of ethnic diversity in the workforce.<sup>26</sup> This lack of diversity can result in the marginalization of certain groups, such as Indonesian migrant workers, and perpetuate a system of inequality where their voices are silenced. The Indonesian government has recently voiced its concern about the well-being of its citizens working abroad, and there have been calls to end the exportation of domestic workers in favour of creating better local employment opportunities.<sup>27</sup> In response to the mistreatment of migrant workers, particularly in Hong Kong, the local population has demonstrated empathy and support for the victims of abuse. However, it is crucial to recognize that the case of Erwiana Sulistyarningsih is merely one of many instances of mistreatment that have gone unnoticed by the wider public.

In addition to the challenges faced by Indonesian workers, Pakistani Muslims living in Hong Kong face even greater difficulties related to language barriers and education. Unlike Indonesian workers, who may have the option of returning to their home country or seeking employment elsewhere, many Pakistanis have established roots in Hong Kong over several generations and may not have strong ties to their ancestral homeland. This sense of permanence in Hong Kong, combined with a lack of social and economic mobility, often results in a generational cycle of poverty within the Pakistani community. Many Pakistani families in Hong Kong are deeply entrenched in poverty and struggle to access the necessary resources to improve their socio-economic status.

A significant barrier to social and economic integration for Pakistanis is the pervasive issue of language. Cantonese, the primary language spoken in Hong Kong, is often a prerequisite for employment, yet many Pakistani migrants and their families are unable to speak it. This language barrier has persisted for generations, and despite living in Hong Kong for extended periods, many Pakistani families continue to rely on Urdu or English at home, which limits their ability to interact effectively with the local population. Unfortunately, the Hong Kong education system has not sufficiently addressed this issue, as schools have not been equipped with alternative learning programs tailored to the specific needs of the Pakistani community. Consequently, Pakistani migrant workers and their children face significant challenges in integrating into the broader society.

In many cases, Pakistani migrant parents view Hong Kong as a temporary residence and encourage their daughters to marry early rather than prioritizing their education. This cultural outlook, coupled with the socio-economic pressures faced by these families, leads to limited educational attainment, particularly among female children. As a result, these children are often unable to break the cycle of poverty and are left with fewer opportunities for upward mobility. Moreover, some conservative Muslim parents prioritize

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<sup>26</sup> Aaron Brooks (2020), *Abused hands: The plight of Southeast Asian foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong*, The Peter Peckard Memorial Prize, pp. 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> Aaron Brooks (2020), *Abused hands: The plight of Southeast Asian foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong*, p. 4.



religious education over formal academic qualifications, further limiting their children's career prospects. The societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and religious expectations can, in some cases, undermine the long-term economic well-being of these families.

The issue of educational attainment among Pakistani migrant families in Hong Kong is further complicated by changes in the local education system. In 2012, the Hong Kong government implemented reforms to the examination system, increasing the difficulty of obtaining a bachelor's degree. These changes have had a disproportionate impact on marginalized communities, including Pakistani migrants, and have indirectly contributed to the perpetuation of poverty. Despite the clear link between higher education and socio-economic mobility, few students within the Pakistani community recognize the importance of pursuing higher education as a means of improving their family's economic situation. Chee Wai-Chi argues that government intervention, while necessary, may not be the most effective solution to the poverty experienced by Pakistani migrants in Hong Kong. Instead, a more holistic approach that involves addressing the root causes of educational disadvantage and promoting greater cultural integration is needed to break the cycle of poverty and marginalization.<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion, the challenges faced by Muslim migrant communities in Hong Kong and Macau are deeply intertwined with issues of language, education, and socio-economic mobility. For Indonesian workers, the limited integration into the broader social context and the exploitation they endure in the domestic work sector is compounded by the lack of educational opportunities in their home country. Similarly, Pakistani migrants face even greater barriers due to entrenched language difficulties and a lack of social support for their children's education. These challenges highlight the need for more comprehensive policies and support systems that address the specific needs of Muslim migrant communities in these regions, ensuring that they can break free from the cycle of poverty and fully integrate into the social and economic fabric of Hong Kong and Macau.

### ***Social Prejudices Faced by Muslims***

One of the most significant challenges Muslims faces in non-Islamic cities or countries is the pervasive misconceptions surrounding Islam. Despite ongoing efforts by Muslim communities to improve the image of Islam through regular engagement with non-Muslims and participation in various social, cultural, and interfaith activities, changing public perceptions remains a formidable task. The legacy of terrorist attacks over the last two decades has had a profound impact on how Islam is viewed in many parts of the world. Even in regions where individuals have not directly experienced such violent events, there remains a tendency to equate Islam with violence and extremism. This persistent association continues to fuel stereotypes and misconceptions about the religion, presenting a barrier to greater understanding and acceptance of Muslim communities.

In regions like Hong Kong and Macau, where the population is predominantly non-Muslim and largely influenced by Western cultural and political norms, these misconceptions are often reinforced. Due to the historical and ongoing influence of Europe and the United States on global affairs, local perspectives in Hong Kong and Macau are frequently shaped by Western ideologies. This alignment with Western viewpoints can lead to a tendency to attribute any wrongdoing or perceived violence to Muslims solely based on their religion, perpetuating the notion that Islam is inherently violent or that its followers are predisposed to aggression. This biased outlook reflects not only a lack of understanding but also a broader socio-political attitude of superiority that is often directed at non-Western cultures.

While the level of Islamophobia in Hong Kong and Macau is not as acute as in regions such as Europe and the United States, where terrorism-related fears have been a constant source of tension, Muslims in these cities still encounter various forms of prejudice. Unlike in the West, where terrorism and national security concerns have played a prominent role in heightening Islamophobic sentiments, Hong Kong and Macau have not experienced such extreme incidents in recent years. However, that does not mean Muslims in these regions are free from discrimination. Cognitive and verbal forms of discrimination, which may not always

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<sup>28</sup> Wai-Chi Chee (2018), "Opportunities, challenges and transitions: educational aspirations of Pakistani migrant youth in Hong Kong," *Realities and Aspirations for Asian Youth*, Vol. 16, No.1, p. 94.

be as overt as physical violence but are nonetheless harmful, are still prevalent in daily interactions, particularly for those who speak Cantonese fluently and can pick up on subtle biases in conversation. These forms of discrimination may manifest in stereotypes about Muslims, especially women who wear traditional Islamic clothing or individuals who are visibly identifiable as Muslim.

In societies like Hong Kong and Macau, where freedom of speech is a fundamental right, the authorities typically refrain from intervening unless physical altercations occur. This liberal stance towards freedom of expression means that discriminatory opinions, including Islamophobic sentiments, may be expressed more openly without significant consequences. Paul O'Connor posits that, in such societies, Muslims may need to endure these biases while upholding the values of freedom of speech and expression. Although this perspective may seem unconventional, it highlights O'Connor's astute understanding of societal dynamics, particularly in multicultural and diverse urban settings.<sup>29</sup>

The multicultural landscape of Hong Kong, as O'Connor argues, differs significantly from that of traditional Western societies. Hong Kong's unique social structure, which is often characterized by a largely mono-ethnic population, means that multiculturalism there is not always actively encouraged or supported.<sup>30</sup> This lack of active engagement in fostering social harmony with minority groups can result in a kind of social exclusion for Muslims, as well as other ethnic minorities. A similar dynamic can be observed in Macau, where although the population is more diverse, social integration of Muslim communities is still limited.

As O'Connor suggests, Muslims in Hong Kong and Macau must find effective strategies for integrating into the local communities, despite facing challenges related to prejudice and misunderstanding. Prejudices against Muslims in Hong Kong are often more pronounced than in Macau, likely due to the larger population of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong and the more diverse demographic landscape. Two major issues stand out in relation to social prejudice against Muslims: first, the negative stereotypes that have been reinforced by global terror attacks in Europe, the United States, and other regions; and second, the cognitive biases related to the appearance, clothing, and socio-economic status of Muslims.

Social psychology scholars such as Michael A. Hogg and Graham M. Vaughan note that social prejudice and discriminatory behaviour are closely intertwined.<sup>31</sup> Discrimination arises from cognitive biases, which in turn shape how individuals perceive and interact with others based on factors such as religion, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. In the case of Muslims in Hong Kong and Macau, these biases are often visible in everyday interactions, such as when Muslim women wear traditional clothing, including hijabs or abayas, to attend prayer at the mosque or for social outings.

In some cases, these clothing choices are misinterpreted as symbols of oppression or extremism. Simon Holliday notes that such misunderstandings arise due to a lack of familiarity with Islamic teachings and cultural practices, leading to the erroneous belief that these women are subjected to gender discrimination or that they are radicalized. Although debates about Muslim clothing in Hong Kong and Macau rarely escalate into physical confrontations, these debates reflect underlying tensions and misunderstandings. Nonetheless, mutual respect for religious practices is generally upheld in both cities.<sup>32</sup>

The economic status of Muslims in Hong Kong and Macau is often lower than that of the local population, with Muslim workers typically earning lower wages. This economic disparity contributes to the marginalization of Muslims in these societies, as their social and professional contributions are frequently overlooked or undervalued. Despite this, there are exceptional individuals who have managed to break through these barriers. Notable examples include Miss Raees Begum Baig (碧樺依), a Pakistani Chinese Muslim who serves as a lecturer at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Syed Kemal Shah Bokhary,

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<sup>29</sup> Paul O'Connor (2010), "Accepting prejudice and valuing freedom: young Muslims and everyday multiculturalism in Hong Kong," *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 5, p. 525.

<sup>30</sup> Paul O'Connor (2010), "Accepting prejudice and valuing freedom: young Muslims and everyday multiculturalism in Hong Kong," p. 527.

<sup>31</sup> Michael A. Hogg and Graham M. Vaughan (2018), *Social psychology*, UK: Pearson, p. 369.

<sup>32</sup> Simon Holliday (2019), "Burkini clad swimmers Hong Kong domestic helpers," *South China Morning Post*, retrieved on 31st July 2023 from <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/3025809/burkini-clad-swimmers-hong-kong-domestic-helpers>.

a Pakistani Muslim who is a well-respected judge in Hong Kong.<sup>33</sup> These individuals serve as inspiring examples of the potential for success within the Muslim community in Hong Kong and Macau, though they remain the exception rather than the norm.

On the other hand, there are unfortunate instances where crimes such as drug abuse, involvement with triad societies, and other illegal activities have been disproportionately attributed to the Pakistani community in Hong Kong. This has contributed to the stereotype that Pakistanis are uncivilized and pose a threat to social security. As Lee, Lee, and Sin (2021) highlight, media portrayals often amplify the mistakes or misdeeds of individuals, thus perpetuating negative stereotypes about the entire group. The association of certain crimes with Pakistanis is compounded by broader issues of social inequality and misinterpretation of Islamic values.<sup>34</sup> The debate over Muslim clothing, for instance, is intricately tied to these broader socio-economic factors, including issues of class and identity. This ongoing discourse involves balancing the principles of religious freedom and respect for local culture, but it also reveals the lack of understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

Considering these challenges, the economic status and professional achievements of Muslims in Hong Kong and Macau are likely affected by the social biases they encounter. The majority bias theory in cognitive science suggests that individuals tend to support groups or ideologies that benefit them, often overlooking the struggles and achievements of minority groups. This cognitive tendency to prioritize the interests of the majority over those of minorities can lead to the marginalization of Muslim communities in the social and economic spheres. The lack of recognition of their accomplishments and challenges is a significant issue, and it points to a deeper problem of inadequate education and awareness about the diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds that constitute Hong Kong and Macau's society.

To address these issues, it is essential to promote greater awareness and education about the Muslim community's contributions, values, and cultural practices. By fostering a more inclusive and equitable society, both Hong Kong and Macau can create an environment where religious and cultural differences are respected and celebrated. Only through such efforts can misconceptions about Islam and Muslims be dispelled, paving the way for greater social harmony and understanding.

## **Conclusion**

The Muslim community in Hong Kong and Macau faces a range of challenges shaped by the complex interplay of religious, social, and economic factors. These challenges are not unique to these two regions but are common to Muslims living in non-Islamic cities and countries. The issues they encounter span religious adherence, integration into local society, and the social prejudices they often face. Each of these challenges is intricately linked to the historical, social, and spatial contexts in which Muslims in Hong Kong and Macau find themselves. To fully understand and address these challenges, it is essential to consider the broader historical framework, including three fundamental elements: human elements, space, and time. In both Hong Kong and Macau, Muslims can practice their religion freely due to the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. This legal framework provides a solid foundation for Muslims to maintain their religious practices without external interference. However, while religious freedom is ensured, the broader infrastructure to support Muslim communities such as affordable transportation options and access to halal food remains inadequate. Transportation costs can pose significant barriers to regular attendance at mosques and other religious events. These issues are further compounded by the limited availability of halal food outlets, which makes it challenging for Muslims to maintain their dietary requirements in a convenient and affordable manner. One solution to this problem could be to foster stronger cooperation between Hong Kong, Macau, and Southeast Asian countries, as well as Pakistan. This would not only facilitate the importation of halal food but also provide access to reference books and educational materials on Islam, supporting the broader educational and cultural exchange between these regions.

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<sup>33</sup> Anita M. Weiss (1991), "South Asian Muslims in Hong Kong: creation of a local boy identity," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3, p. 429.

<sup>34</sup> Lee, C. A., Lee, K. J. and Sin, K. E., (2021), "Ethnic minority and criminal behavior in Hong Kong," Thesis, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong SAR, pp. 14-17.

In the long term, the Hong Kong and Macau governments must take proactive steps to enhance the living conditions of their Muslim populations. This includes continuing to strengthen ties with Southeast Asia and Pakistan, ensuring that these countries' contributions to the Muslim community are not limited to food imports but also extend to educational and cultural exchanges. Such initiatives would contribute to a more integrated Muslim community, one that is not only well-supported in terms of its basic needs but also encouraged to flourish within the wider social fabric of Hong Kong and Macau.

The issue of integration is another crucial aspect of the challenges faced by Muslims in these regions. Integration is not just about accommodating religious practices but also about fostering a broader sense of ethnic harmony and social inclusion. The government plays an essential role in facilitating this process, ensuring that the integration of Muslims whether they are foreign workers, students, or locally born individuals is supported by policies that promote ethnic harmony and respect for diversity. However, achieving social harmony is not solely the responsibility of Muslims. It requires a collaborative effort between the local population, the government, and Muslim leaders. It is essential for all parties to work together to build a social consensus that promotes mutual respect and understanding. This can be accomplished through legislative reforms, social resources, and ongoing dialogue between the different communities, with Muslim leaders serving as key facilitators in this process.

Despite these efforts, changing social prejudices against Muslims remains a formidable challenge. Negative stereotypes and biases, which have often been shaped by global events such as terrorist attacks, are deeply ingrained in many societies, including Hong Kong and Macau. However, there is growing acceptance of multiculturalism and social diversity, a positive trend that can lead to greater social inclusion. To effectively combat prejudice and foster a greater sense of belonging for Muslims, it is essential to provide long-term support, not just temporary financial assistance. Social inclusion requires a sustained effort to create meaningful relationships and opportunities for interaction between Muslims and the local population. This process of inclusion must be a long-term plan, spanning multiple generations, as deep-seated prejudices and biases take time to change.

The Indonesian Muslim community in Hong Kong and Macau provides an example of successful integration. Indonesian workers, particularly those in domestic care roles, are widely admired for their linguistic skills and seamless integration into local society. Their ability to communicate effectively in Cantonese and adapt to local cultural norms has earned them respect from the local population. As a result, Indonesians in both Hong Kong and Macau have been granted the freedom to gather in public spaces such as Victoria Park in Hong Kong and around the Macau Mosque on weekends and public holidays. This gesture reflects the recognition of their contributions and their fundamental human rights. It also acknowledges the dignity and hard work that these individuals exhibit daily.

Furthermore, the Pakistani community in both regions has made significant strides in its integration. Over the years, there has been an increasing number of Pakistani students earning bachelor's degrees and participating in higher education. This trend not only reflects the community's commitment to self-improvement but also signals their desire to integrate more fully into the local social and economic structures. These accomplishments represent a positive shift towards greater inclusion and recognition of the contributions that Muslims make to the local societies.

The three essential elements of history human elements, space, and time play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of Muslims in Hong Kong and Macau. Human elements refer to the lived experiences of Muslim individuals, their personal struggles, and their interactions with the local population. These personal experiences are shaped by the social dynamics and cultural contexts in which they find themselves. In this case, the history of migration, colonial influences, and the role of religion in public life all contribute to the challenges faced by Muslims in these cities.

The element of space refers to the physical and social environments in which Muslims live and interact. In the case of Hong Kong and Macau, the spatial dimension is significant in terms of access to mosques, halal food, and other religious or cultural services. The limited availability of these services, combined with the

high cost of transportation, exacerbates the difficulties Muslims face in practicing their faith. At the same time, public spaces such as parks and community centers also serve as places where Muslims can interact with the broader society and build social capital. The ability to create such spaces for positive interaction is crucial in fostering integration and mutual understanding.

Time, as the third element, is integral to the process of social change. Time is needed for prejudices to be overcome and for cultural integration to occur. The process of integrating Muslims into Hong Kong and Macau's societies is not instantaneous; it requires sustained efforts across generations. The long-term investment in education, social services, and interfaith dialogue is essential for achieving a harmonious and inclusive society. As time progresses, it is hoped that social prejudices will diminish, and Muslims will be able to fully participate in all aspects of local life.

In conclusion, the Muslim communities in Hong Kong and Macau are grappling with challenges related to religious practice, social integration, and prejudice. These challenges are shaped by historical, social, and spatial contexts, and addressing them requires a multi-faceted approach. The government, local communities, and Muslim leaders must work together to create an environment that fosters understanding, respect, and inclusion. Importantly, the elements of human experience, space, and time must be considered when developing policies and strategies to address these issues. These elements are fundamental in shaping the future of Muslims in Hong Kong and Macau, and their careful consideration is key to creating a more inclusive and harmonious society.

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