



Chinese in Pakistan: Diasporic Identity, Faith and Practice

Speaker: Ms Alice Ping-Hsiu Lin

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The speaker laid out the scope of the presentation at the very outset. She mentioned that the presentation would be in two parts - the first part would deal with the brief migratory history of the community and economic profile of pioneer migrants and; the second part of the presentation was related to the religious context in Pakistan and preserving Chinese practices. The speaker highlighted the relationship between China and Pakistan. She mentioned that for a past few decades China and Pakistan had been engaged in economic and military arrangements which had changed the geopolitics of Asia. The relationship further deepened with the agreement of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and development of the Gwadar port. CPEC along with a lot of other commercial activities happening in Pakistan had facilitated an economic migration of Chinese nationals to the neighbouring country. This had brought about economic and societal changes but this has largely overshadowed the history of the dwindling Pakistani-Chinese - the main subject of the presentation. The ethnographic focus of the presentation was the Chinese diaspora in Pakistan and the ways in which Pakistani-Chinese families, whose presence in the region spans multiple generations, have retained and adopted certain practices and faiths while traversing a particularly turbulent time in South Asian history.

The speaker presented a brief account of Chinese migration to Indian Subcontinent which was a result of colonial commercial exchanges and labour networks between South Asia and China. The partition of British India divided the population into Indian Chinese and Pakistani Chinese. According to the speculation of the speaker, there are no more than 1000 Pakistani Chinese

residing in Pakistan today. They mainly reside in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore and Karachi. They have their origins in China, mainly in Guangdong, Hubei and Shandong. Most of the pioneer Chinese descendants were born in two ports – Dacca (Dhaka) and Chittagong during the 1950s; from where they migrated to different cities in Pakistan thus making them ‘twice migrants’.

Further, the speaker elaborated about the socioeconomic profile of the Pakistani Chinese. These people had been actively involved in the service industry. Mainly, they were either involved in restaurant businesses and in running beauty parlours (mostly Christians) or were dentists (Karachi) and cobblers (Rawalpindi and Lahore). However, today the landscape has changed that has led to their diversification into new businesses and professions.

The speaker revealed the religious context of the Chinese diaspora in Pakistan. In Pakistan, where Islam plays a role of unification and mobilisation, Pakistani Chinese mostly chose Christianity as their religion. Christians played an important role during the partition where they provided refugee homes, institutions, and established infrastructure that encouraged conversions. Most of the Pakistani Chinese converted to Christianity for reasons other than religion. The pervasiveness of missionary schools, certain pragmatism in Christianity, incompatibility of Islam with Chinese traditions, plans of re-emigration and association of Christianity with modernity made most Pakistani Chinese choose this religion over others, even though, religious minorities in Pakistan face discrimination, stigmatization and state prosecution till today.

However, many of the families interviewed in Lahore and Rawalpindi did not attend church. There was also a marked difference in the level of religiosity between the first generation born in former East Pakistan and the young generation of Pakistani Chinese. The level of religiosity in the young population of the community was much less than that of the first generation.

Further, the speaker elaborated about the Chinese diaspora in Pakistan and their identity. The Chinese diaspora in Pakistan seemed to generally identify with Chinese traditions and Christianity with orthodoxy as they sort of interweave their rituals and practices of multiple identities that remind them of their origins and also of their community. More generally, the Chinese form a distinct grouping among Christians in Pakistan, exhibiting very middle class and modernised qualities which separate them from the lower classes. The speaker argued that the

symbolic dimension associated with Christianity constitutes an equally important factor in Pakistani Chinese reinvention of identity. The negotiated multiple identities depending on their socioeconomic background, preservation of Chinese practices through adoption of Christianity and relating Christianity to modernity had created a framework for the identification of most of the Pakistani Chinese.

The diaspora should not simply be reduced to a dichotomized framework between the society of origin and society of immigration. Rather the framework for examining any diaspora should take into consideration many homelands to which members of the diaspora might have claims to as part of their histories.

Finally, the speaker argued that although the instability of the country in recent decades, coupled with state and non-state discrimination against minorities in sectarian violence is likely to be an obstacle for their re-socialisation and integration into the Muslim society, still many of the Pakistani Chinese negotiated their multiple identities shaped by their own experiences, socioeconomic and religious background.

In the Q&A session the speaker answered several relevant questions. On a question on the rise of sectarianism in Pakistan and how it played out among the Pakistani Chinese, the speaker presented various personal accounts of Pakistani Chinese. The speaker pointed out that Chinese in Pakistan are very low profile in their communities and it was rare to witness some forms of discrimination based on sectarianism for the Pakistani Chinese community.

Report prepared by Avadhi Patni, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Alice Ping-Hsiu Lin is a second-year doctoral student in Anthropology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her current dissertation project focuses on the coloured gem trade in South Asia. In studying the lives of suppliers, traders, jewellers, and consumers, her research explores conceptions of what is licit/illicit, trust, and authenticity across religious and ethnic groups. Prior to doctoral studies, she obtained a Masters in Area Studies from EHESS, France where her research focused on the Chinese in Pakistan.

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