Chinese Muslims and the Conversion of Melaka to Islam

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Abstract. This paper is an attempt to initiate a critical reassessment of the traditional academic narrative concerning the early fifteenth century conversion to Islam of Melaka, the Southeast Asian entrepôt. To date scholarship has, and by choosing to rely principally on early Portuguese accounts (especially that of Tomé Pires), produced a narrative which has perceived this event as the result of intervention by the earlier regional Islamic centre of Samudra-Pasai. Here, however, and primarily via a re-examination of Pires, the hypothesis is developed that Melaka’s conversion was actually instigated primarily by Muslims from China – specifically by the Chinese Muslim, Zheng He – in the context of early Ming dynasty attempts to expand trade in the region.

Keywords: Melaka, Islam, Southeast Asia, Zheng He, Conversion, China, Trade.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to critically re-examine and, ultimately, propose a re-writing of the traditional historical narrative concerning the conversion to Islam of Melaka, the fifteenth century Southeast Asian entrepôt. In this regard, it sits within a much wider endeavour to initiate a re-assessment of the current (and predominantly Western) academic view of the circumstances surrounding the Islamization of Southeast Asia as a whole between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the specific context of Melaka, however, to date scholarship has suggested, while gleaning its information principally from the accounts of early travellers to the region (especially the Portuguese administrator, Tomé Pires), that Islam came to the city in c.1410CE through the Sumatran kingdom of Samudra-Pasai, an earlier regional centre of Islam that reputedly converted in c.1292CE. Thus, the descendants or compatriots of the Muslim missionaries who had operated there, it is thought, moved on to Melaka, spreading the faith as they went. Although the origin of these original missionaries has never been settled, suggestions have been limited to traders and/or Sufis from the Hadramaut, Gujarat, Bengal, South India or a combination of two or more of these four. In any event, it has consequently been these Muslims, originating from Western Asia, who have traditionally been attributed with the introduction of Islam into the region through the medium of these two cities. Here, however, the hypothesis shall be developed that the conversion of Melaka was actually instigated primarily by Muslims from China and had little, if anything, to do with Samudra-Pasai. The suggestion that Chinese Muslims were involved in the dissemination of Islam in other parts of the region (especially Northern Java) is not a new idea, having had a clear presence in Indonesian and Malaysian academic literature for a while. Such a theory has not, however, been developed with regards to Melaka and, as such, this paper represents the first attempt to do so.

2. Re-assessing Pires

As stated above, the aforementioned account by Pires, called the Suma Oriental, has formed the principal foundation of all previous scholarly attempts to describe Melaka’s conversion. Finished in the city itself during the year 1515, and so not long after its conquest by the Portuguese, this text essentially comprises a careful description of the South and Southeast Asian region, produced for the benefit of the Portuguese court during the period of its commercial and territorial expansion in the East. With regards to Melaka, its account is supposedly based upon information Pires gleaned from Javanesse traders he came into direct contact with and deals with matters in an eminently practical, straightforward fashion. As such, it has been highly praised by historians as a largely factual account. Consequently, and given the role it has subsequently

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taken in the formation of the historical narrative with which we are concerned, it is only appropriate that it forms the key focus here. What, however, does it have to say about Melaka’s conversion?

In short, Pires posits the city’s conversion as having been the result of Samudra-Pasai. The trade of that city, he claims, was early on coveted by Melaka’s second ruler, Iskandar Shah, who tried on a number of occasions to draw its merchants towards his own city. The latter were all Muslims from South Asia and, as they began to migrate to Melaka under this pressure, some of them went at the specific instigation of the Sultan of Samudra-Pasai with the aim of trying to convert Iskandar. This they finally managed to achieve eight years from the end of his long reign (although no exact dates are given by Pires, this is commonly thought to have been in c.1416), a princess from Samudra-Pasai being offered to him in marriage in the process. As such, a scenario emerges which spins Melaka’s conversion as having been the result of events tied up with commercial concerns. In and of itself, there is nothing inherently implausible about this – a link between trade and the Islamic conversion of Southeast Asian entrepôts more generally has, for example, been suggested by numerous scholars. In addition, it is known that, not only were Indian Muslim merchants very active in the region at the time in question (Gujarati Muslims, for example, made up the largest number of merchants in Melaka when the Portuguese invaded), but that Melaka traded actively with Samudra-Pasai for much of its history. Before we take all this as reason enough to accept Pires’ account, however, it should be noted that there is another section of the Suma which, when considered in the context of what else is known about the historical events of this period, makes us doubt the above version of events.

Thus, during the part of the Suma which recounts the end of Iskandar Shah’s reign, there is a point where the narrative suddenly (and during what is otherwise a linear chronological structure) jumps back from the death of Iskandar to when he was forty five. At that time he is said to have decided to visit China, to pay allegiance to the Emperor. While there he is said to have been received with much honour, being granted an item called the ‘seal of China’ before finally returning home. It is on that return journey, however, that another event occurred which is of interest to us. As such, it is worth quoting at length:

And the said Xaquem Darxa [Iskandar Shah] came [back to Melaka] in the company of a great captain who brought him by command of the said king of China. The captain brought with him a beautiful Chinese daughter, and when the said Xaquem Darxa reached Melaka, in order to do honour to the said captain, he married her, although she was not a woman of rank. And heathens do not mind being married to Moorish women, because it is the custom here, and the Moors are better pleased to marry their women to heathens than for themselves to marry heathen women, as they make their husbands Moors.

Given the focus of our discussion, the last line of this quotation is immediately suggestive but, before we consider that point, what other information do we have about the event here described? Unfortunately, Pires’ text again breaks here, resuming its linear chronological sequence with the ascension of the next Melakan ruler. As such, we are given no further details and, equally, apart from a brief, almost identical mention in d’Albuquerque’s account of Melaka, there would seem to be no record of this event elsewhere. Pires’ editor speculates that it might be a garbled reference to the Ming princess Hang Li Po who, according to Melakan folklore, was sent from China by the Emperor to marry Sultan Mansur Shah (the sixth ruler of Melaka). This hypothesis, however, can be easily dismissed on several counts. For example, the ‘beautiful Chinese daughter’ described here is not a woman of rank, whereas Hang Li Po was. Equally, Hang Li Po was not a Muslim as the woman described here seems to have been. But, even if we can find no further information about this event elsewhere, its true significance can still be discerned when we consider the probable identity of the ‘great captain’.

3. The ‘Great Captain’

Although no name for this individual is provided by Pires (or D’Albuquerque), on closer inspection we can (provided we make the assumption he is likely to be broadly correct in his details) pick out from the above quotation four important points which provide some ground for an identification. Thus, first of all it is clear that the individual in question must have been a man of some repute (and so still the ‘great’ captain many years after the events discussed must have occurred). Secondly, the statement ‘and the Moors are better pleased to marry their women to heathens,’ suggests, given the context, that the captain was a Muslim. Thirdly, he evidently sailed to Melaka and, fourthly, if the Emperor commanded him to do so in order to
carry the ruler of that city back to his country of origin, then a consideration of the Ming shi (the official court record of the Ming Dynasty, accepted by modern historians as an exceptionally accurate source of information) suggests he must have been a eunuch in the Imperial service as, at that time, such diplomatic missions were routinely entrusted only to such people. From all of this, the suggestion becomes that the man in question is likely to have been the Chinese Admiral, Zheng He, who made seven epic voyages to Southeast Asia between 1405 and 1433. Thus, not only was he a Muslim, but also a Grand Eunuch in the service of the Imperial court. In the latter role, he was also commander of its fleets, which regularly escorted foreign dignitaries to and from their places of origin. Indeed, he is the first (and only) Chinese Admiral recorded as having sailed to Melaka, sometimes in the company of its rulers. He also left an unquestionable mark on the region, as is testified to by the number of shrines and temples dedicated to him throughout it – including at Melaka. As such, the case for Zheng He being Pires’ ‘great captain’ is a good one but, even if so, what does this matter? The answer to this is tied up with the issue of which Melakan ruler can actually be said to have travelled with him on this occasion. Was it really Iskandar?

We know from the Ming shi that only three Melakan rulers visited China personally – Parameswara, Iskandar and Sri Maharaja, or the first three rulers of the city. As such, there is no a priori reason to dismiss Pires’ claims, as Iskandar clearly did go to China. Indeed, we can, because we are looking for a ruler who travelled personally with Zheng He, automatically discount Sri Maharaja anyway as neither of his trips (occurring in 1424 and 1434) coincide with the dates for Zheng He’s voyages. Consequently, this leaves us with only Parameswara and Iskandar as likely candidates, the former visiting China in 1411 and the latter in 1414 and 1419. The first thing to note is that none of these dates correspond to any of Zheng He’s outward journeys, but only to return ones. This poses a problem but, if we assume a degree of confusion in Pires’ narrative (which has been observed in other areas), then let us presume for the time being that such has also occurred here and that we are actually looking for a return journey to China. But if so, then we know from the Ming shi that Zheng He was personally present with the Melakan ruler on only two of these journeys – those of 1411 and 1419. As such, Pires’ account must refer to one of these two, but which?

Given that the above extract speaks of the ruler in question as being a ‘heathen,’ the natural assumption is that the reference is actually to Parameswara, as he has a Hindu name and Pires describes him as a non-Muslim until his death. But, of course, he also makes it clear that Iskandar was a heathen for much of his life too and so this alone is insufficient to make us doubt his narrative. But, if we look a little further at the known detail of the above two trips, we can see that there are indeed further reasons to suppose that Pires has confused an event in Parameswara’s reign with one from Iskandar’s. Thus, the description Pires gives of the visit makes it clear that it was a grand event but, from the Ming shi, we know that neither of Iskandar’s visits were. Thus, his 1419 visit occurred in conjunction with sixteen other diplomatic missions and, consequently, only limited attention was given to him personally. By contrast, however, Parameswara’s visit involved a great deal of spectacle. He arrived with his whole family and a retinue of five hundred and forty people, being treated to lavish banquets, gifts and a personal audience with the Emperor. In addition to all this, however, Parameswara’s visit involved an inscription of verse written by the Emperor himself, stating the moral and political philosophy of the Imperial House. This would, on rare occasions, be given to foreign rulers as a diplomatic gesture that would establish the independence of their kingdom from any foreign power while also bringing it under the protection of China. As such, it is significant that not only the Ming shi, but also both Ma Huan and Fei Hsin, the authors of two eye-witness accounts of Zheng He’s voyages, record such an inscription being given to Parameswara. This was not, however, on a visit to China but rather in 1409 when, according to Fei Hsin, the Emperor Yung-lo ordered Zheng He to travel to Melaka and “bestow [upon the ruler] a pair of silver seals, a cup, girdle, and robe [and to] set up a stone tablet [stating that this] territory had been raised to [the rank of] the Country of Melaka.” This ‘stone tablet,’ performing the function of establishing Melaka as a kingdom, reveals itself to be the above verse of the Emperor and so (probably) the ‘seal’ of Pires. The problem, however, is that the circumstances of its delivery are clearly different from the above, which creates a difficulty in directly equating the two. But it is nonetheless the case that Pires claims the Melakan ruler with whom we are concerned received the seal of China and, from all available Chinese sources, we know...
this can only have been Parameswara. As such, and given the other reasons presented, it is the argument here that the account of Zheng He marrying a Chinese Muslim daughter to a ruler of Melaka actually belongs to the reign of Parameswara. As to precisely when it occurred, either it was an event in association with his 1411 visit to China, or it happened when Zheng He visited Melaka in 1409 (Pires then conflating it with the 1411 visit during the retelling). But regardless of which of these dates is correct, what is the justification for bringing the event to bear upon the conversion of Melaka?

4. Chinese Muslims and the Conversion of Melaka

To begin with, it is clear that Pires does not attribute Melaka’s conversion to the aforementioned marriage, preferring instead to cite Iskandar Shah’s attempts to attract trade to his kingdom. But, in the context of that explanation, it is worth noting that the surviving evidence for fifteenth century Southeast Asian trading patterns suggests that, up until the 1430’s, it was China and not Samudra-Pasai which dominated trade in the region and with which Melaka had a particularly close relationship. Thus, to expand Chinese trade in the region was a primary objective of Zheng He’s various voyages and, in this way, Ma Huan notes that the Admiral quickly realised the importance of Melaka as a potential regional trading centre – not only because it was positioned directly on the trade route to India and the Middle East, but also because it was located at the end of the monsoons and had a naturally sheltered harbour. Consequently, Ma Huan records that (and during Parameswara’s reign) Zheng He established a regional headquarters there, building up a Chinese trading community to use as a rallying point for his fleet. As such, China essentially sponsored the rise of Melaka because, prior to this, it was not known as a trading centre.

A dominant role for Chinese merchants is also attested to by Arab navigational treatises of this period. Thus, the texts of both Sulaiman al-Mahri and Ahmad ibn Majid make it clear that, not only did Melaka develop as the most important Southeast Asian trading centre at this time, but that Chinese merchants (who were frequently Muslims themselves) were to be found throughout the region. Indeed, the entire mainland coast of Southeast Asia north of Singapore was referred to by them as the coast of China, so strong was that country’s influence. Surviving archaeology also suggests Melaka’s close relationship with China until that country retreated into itself from 1434 onwards. Thus, prior to that date, deposits in the city show a heavy distribution of Ming dynasty porcelain at the expense of all other forms of pottery, as well as abundant examples of Chinese coinage, which appear to have been used as standard currency in the city.

In light of the above, a very real possibility emerges that, if there is any basis to Pires’ claims that an early Melakan ruler’s attempts to secure trade played a role in that city’s conversion, China and the Muslim Zheng He are likely to have been involved in those events because, at that time, it was they who dominated trade with Melaka. In this context, that the above quotation states that the ‘great captain’ from China did not mind contracting the marriage of a Chinese Muslim girl to a heathen ruler because Muslim women tended to ‘make their husbands Moors’ becomes significant and it is the supposition here that in this extract Pires has preserved a second, albeit partial, account of how Melaka converted. Indeed, as already discussed, the account appears to represent a break with the established, chronologically linear narrative form Pires employs. This may be because it is a second, interpolated account inserted by him (or someone else) into a wider, already constructed narrative. In this manner, it is possible that it represents an extract from a source other than the one he admits taking most of his information from – that is, the Javanese one – and which had a different version of how the city became Islamic.

Such then is the conclusion of this paper. It is worth noting in closing, however, that the idea of Chinese Muslim involvement in, if not its dissemination, then at least the shaping of Islam in Southeast Asia finds support from a consideration of many traditional features of Islamic culture in the region, both from Melaka and beyond. Thus, the traditional form of the Southeast Asian mosque, to be found throughout the region, has been noted from earliest times as Chinese influenced. Hwang Chung, for example, a Chinese chronicler writing in 1537, claimed that, and while basing his work on the accounts of earlier travellers, the major public buildings of Melaka (which must, presumably, have included its mosques) were built like Chinese Imperial Halls and, at least in the case of the palace, with the help of Zheng He. Indeed, a number of the earliest surviving mosques in that city (although of a later date) can still be seen to have a distinctly Chinese style. Similarly, some of the earliest surviving mosques from elsewhere in the region (such as at Demak,
north Java), while sharing the same basic form as those at Melaka, can also be seen to incorporate the use of traditional Chinese construction techniques, such as pieced columns. Turning to other elements of Southeast Asian Islamic culture, much of the earliest surviving examples of Islamic artwork in the region can be seen to use a distinctly Chinese set of motifs – most notably cloud patterns and lotus forms. Such are not found on any equivalent pre-Islamic Southeast Asian artefacts or, indeed, on art of the Islamic regions of Western Asia. They can, however, be found in association with Islamic sites in China. With regards to Southeast Asian Islamic religious practice, there are again interesting parallels with specifically Chinese Muslim practices not seen elsewhere. Thus, there is the practice of striking a gong in the street to announce the coming of the Muslim festival of Eid ul-Fitr, as well as the practice of reading the surah Ya-Sin over the grave of the deceased during the latter festival and at certain set times after death. Given all of this, and the above, the idea of Chinese Muslim influence on Southeast Asian Islam is something that should be taken seriously and is worthy of future research.

5. References


[10] Both of these points can be gleaned from the Sejarah Melayu, the Melakan court chronicle (see: Cheah Boon Kheng, comp., Sejarah Melayu: The Malay Annals, (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 2010)).


[18] Ibid, 26-41 at 37.
[19] Ibid, 26-41 at 35.