Historical context

The history of ethnic Muslims in the colonial era is inseparable from the British colonial power. The first Muslims to settle in Hong Kong were of Chinese origin. From the mid-19th century onwards, Muslim soldiers and business men from the Indian subcontinent arrived in Hong Kong. As Muslims increased in number, the colonial government allocated land to them to build community facilities such as mosques and cemeteries.

The politics of space

The Jamiath Mosque was the first mosque in Hong Kong, built in 1890. After this mosque was demolished, the building was reconstructed as the Shelly Street Mosque, dating from 1915. In terms of religious and cultural rights, the British government's recognition of the needs of Muslims, which resulted in aid being given to them so that they could build a community distinctive from local Chinese culture, was an important step. Nowadays, the Shelly Street Mosque stands as part of the historical heritage of the city and has been recently renovated. As urban reconstruction programmes and estate developers target the site for potential redevelopment, the mosque escapes extinction under the government policy. The present status of the mosque is no longer strategic when compared to the past. Indeed, it signifies the identity crisis of ethnic Muslims in the post-colonial era. Many non-Chinese Muslims are no longer well-off or privileged under the new regime in the post-colonial era as compared to the past. They are forced to scatter in the New Territories driven by the government's urban renewal policy.

Other mosques are in threat of destruction. The Stanley Mosque and the Cape Collinson Mosque (in Chai Wan) are situated in two remote places on Hong Kong Island and are interestingly both built in isolated prison facilities (Stanley Prison and Cape Collinson Correctional Institution). Originally built in the early 20th century to serve for prison and congregation purposes for the Indian Muslim prison staff, the later tremors of mobile populations such as mosques and cemeteries. Among non-Chinese Muslims, who assemble there for their social life and support, exchange of information, and leisure. Non-Chinese and Chinese Muslims live in different segments of society, with different cultural orientations and lifestyles, though they adhere to the universal umma.

The Chan Chi Mosque has a multi-purpose design and clearly caters to the local Chinese mentality. Its multi-purpose design differs from that of the Kowloon Mosque, where the space is mainly devoted to the three prayer halls with luxurious white marble finishing. Moreover, the leaders of the respective Muslim communities in these two mosques also distinctly differ in terms of their ethnic backgrounds: a Chinese imam from China proper leads the Kowloon Mosque, whereas a non-Chinese imam leads the Kowloon Mosque. Chinese Muslims gather in the Chinese restaurant of the Wan Chai Mosque, where they can comfortably enjoy social time and have a Chinese halal meal. Differences in origin, faith and the kingdom lead to the development of the mosques, on one hand, reflect the availability of a variety of spaces to accommodate ethnic differences; on the other hand, there has yet to be developed a stronger solidarity, one which goes beyond ethnic difference, amongst all Hong Kong Muslims.

Spatial distribution and design

The social and cultural status of non-Chinese Muslims in post-colonial Hong Kong can also be examined through the ongoing project of the sixth mosque in Hong Kong, the Sheung Shui Mosque and Islamic Centre. The construction of this mosque is path-breaking as it is the first mosque to be built in the post-colonial New Territories. Urban reconstruction forces many Muslims to move from Hong Kong Island to the new satellite cities in the New Territories. Many of these Muslims are economically less well-off and have no alternative to comply with government policies in order to avail of the absence of facilities in the New Territories, Muslim leaders campaigned for mosques and community facilities. Limited land supply as well as the government’s policy to promote social welfare influenced the negotiations; the latest revision of the design aims at the development of a welfare-oriented mosque, which will not only include a prayer hall but also an English-medium secondary school and facilities for the elderly. Permission to build the Sheung Shui Mosque and Islamic Centre has been granted and Muslim countries including the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have pledged to give full financial support, but resistance continues. Local Chinese residents express the discomfort and lack of flexibility, plans for the mosque, arguing that it may upset social order. The non-Chinese Muslim leader interpreted the opposition as the result of the mosque project. As the planning process of this mosque project is being carried out

One umma, two fates

Non-Chinese Muslims are a deprived population in Hong Kong. In the late 1980s, Muslim leaders lamented the situation they deemed unjust. As compared with that of the colonial era, Resistance of Chinese residents against the mosque in the New Territories expresses just the tip of the iceberg in the marginalisation of non-Chinese Muslims. In general, the non-Chinese Muslim minority suffers from the isolation and racist rhetoric in search of employment and in education. Many children of non-Chinese Muslims have difficulties being admitted to schools. They drop out from school due to problems with learning the native Chinese language, adapting to the curriculum and the Chinese culture of their peers. The non-Chinese Muslims have become conspicuous targets of discrimination due to the label of ‘Islam’ and their skin colour. In contrast, in the eyes of the non-Chinese Muslims, Chinese Muslims are a silent minority that seems to be invisible in society. Their Muslim identity is hardly noticeable in public life. At home with the local Chinese culture and language, Chinese Muslims generally have no difficulty functioning in society. Few of them outwardly express their Muslim identity in everyday life. A non-Chinese Muslim leader observed that many Chinese Muslims ‘forget’ Islam or integrate too comfortably in the ‘westernised’ lifestyle. As Hong Kong has transitioned from the colonial to post-colonial era, mosques have reflected changes, especially in terms of the social and political status of Muslims. Only time will tell what will be the current clear divide between Chinese and non-Chinese Muslims in Hong Kong, and how they will come to terms with the notion of the umma.