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The ambiguity of halal food in Hong Kong

Preserving a halal diet is one of the obligations that Muslims have that highlights their presence as minorities among non-Muslims in a distinct way. Keeping a halal diet in a non-Islamic country reminds Muslims of their religious identity. Unlike the wearing of the veil that reveals a woman publicly as a Muslim, halal food requires a Muslim to be conscientious of their own difference from the non-Muslim majorities they live among. While it is an aspect of religious observance, it is also a very practical reminder to Muslims of their minority status. It is therefore odd for those who have no special dietary requirements to imagine what sort of impact an abstinence from pork might have on everyday life. In Muslim countries the injunction against pork is of little consequence, as the meat is not available because it is neither a part of the region's diet nor culture (Pillsbury 1978, p. 659). Muslims in the West are, however, living amid a culture in which pork is popularly accepted and they are therefore constantly on guard about what they eat.

This chapter highlights how problematic a halal diet can be for Muslims living amid a Chinese food culture, where pork is a cherished ingredient in Chinese cooking. Against the culinary cultural background of Hong Kong, young Muslims make conflicting decisions about what foods are suitably halal and what is not acceptable for them to consume. In some ways this is compounded by language ability; most non-Chinese Muslims have better English-language skills than Chinese skills (Tang 2006, pp. 25–26; Detaramani and Lock 2003), which presents another barrier in obtaining information about the spectrum of food available to them. While racism is an issue for many Muslims in Hong Kong, halal food poses a distinct obstacle that is perhaps more tangible and problematic than incidents of prejudice. The everyday challenges of living as a Muslim in Hong Kong are arguably most distinct with regard to keeping a halal diet. That is not to say that it is impossible or even very difficult,

it is however awkward to live, as many of the participants do, away from Islamic businesses and attend school or work with non-Muslims, and to socialise in the city eating only halal foods. Pillsbury's anthropology of *Hui* in Taiwan highlights the realignment that Islam takes in fusion with Chinese culture. She notes that in conversation with one elderly *Hui* it is claimed that the need to avoid pork is more important than the requirement to pray five times a day (1975, p. 142). Vigilance for the Chinese Muslim is thus reoriented not on attention to prayer, but upon avoidance of pork. In highlighting the central nature of pork in Chinese cooking and culture, Pillsbury explains that the Chinese ideogram for 'home' (家) contains symbols for both 'pig' (豕) and 'roof' (宀) (Pillsbury 1975, p. 142). This example shows precisely how important and fondly the pig is viewed in Chinese culture. The pork proscription is arguably the key cultural signifier of *Hui* in Chinese society.

Writing on the large *Hui* community in the Chinese city of Xian, Gillette gives some in-depth detail about the lengths that Muslims will go to in order to avoid the perceived polluting effects of pork. Crucially, this leads to an abrupt boundary construction between *Hui* and Han in that they are unable to eat together and therefore socialise. The polluting effects of pork are felt to even prevent *Hui* from drinking tea from a cup in a Han house or restaurant as it will have most likely been washed in water that cleaned utensils that cooked, held, or cut pork (Gillette 2000, p. 121). Stereotypes and prejudicial proverbs from China again show that pork is a fundamental boundary between *Hui* and Han identity. One Chinese proverb suggests that a Muslim travelling alone will become fat, while two travelling together would waste away (Israeli 2002, p. 302). This proverb, like others which speak of Muslims, shows how the Han perceive them to be duplicitous secret pork-eaters. Offence and avoidance of pork is even entwined in the way *Hui* choose to speak, avoiding the word 'pig' even when discussing its representation in the Chinese zodiac, but articulating it as a profane and derogatory expression when using foul language (Gillette 2000, p.122). Highlighting once more the association between Han Chinese and *Hui*, Gillette states that *Hui* who move out of the Muslim quarter of Xian are often believed to have compromised on their halal diet and have begun to eat pork (2000, p. 52).

Most of the information regarding being Muslim in a Chinese cultural climate refers to those who are nominally Chinese Muslims, the *Hui*

and the Uyghur. The Hong Kong context provides an opportunity to also consider how Muslims from Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent engage with Chinese cuisine and try to keep a halal diet. Therefore, it is helpful to clarify just what halal food, or allowed food, encompasses. Halal food is not simply that which does not contain pork. All meat to be consumed by Muslims must be slaughtered ritually, cut across the neck while a spoken acknowledgement of god as creator is given. Meat not slaughtered this way is considered *haram*, forbidden, and food that contains traces of non-halal meat is also *haram*. Other foods that may appear halal can also be suspect as they contain ingredients such as gelatine or monosodium glutamate which can contain non-halal meat products. Cross-contamination of foods in preparation can also make food *haram* so some Muslims are cautious and avoid utensils that have been used in kitchens where halal food laws are not followed. For some Muslims, factory food may also be considered *haram* because of the threat of cross-contamination from machinery or workers. In a broader sense, *haram* can also relate to other forbidden items and actions such as alcohol, drugs, and adultery. Regarding food there is great variance between Muslims both culturally and individually as to the extent with which they follow halal laws. For instance, Pakistanis in this project voiced the greatest concerns about halal food. The Africans I spoke to were on the whole more relaxed than Pakistanis regarding halal food. It was only among Indonesian foreign domestic workers that I found respondents who admitted to knowingly eating pork.

In this chapter we see what issues are involved in following or keeping a halal diet. The testimonies reveal how ambiguous the title of halal is in the daily processes of eating foods within the city. The ambiguity requires young Muslims to make a variety of decisions about how fastidious they should be in their halal demands when navigating Hong Kong, and socialising with friends. This ambiguity is accompanied by concerns about family and cultural norms and religious belief and commitment. These accounts resonate with the point made by Ang (2001, p. 143) that 'ambivalence pervades the micro-politics of everyday life in a multicultural society'. However, 'ambiguity is a category of everyday life and perhaps an essential category' (Lefebvre 1991, p. 18). So it is worth remembering that while the multicultural is a prime site for recognising such challenges, such difficulties are diffused throughout everyday

life. While it has been popular to consider food a key way to celebrate and engage with other cultures (Hage 1997) in everyday hybridity, food can also be a site where the differences between minority and majority cultures are at their most distinct and most banal. Indeed, 'nothing is more variable from one human group to another than the notion of what is edible' (de Certeau, Giard, and Mayol 1998, p. 168).

Halal in practice

The primary patterns of keeping halal for young Muslims in Hong Kong are largely related to the norms associated with food at home and also the time the youth spend at home. Accordingly, there are slight gender differences to be noted as the use of home space varies considerably between male and female participants. The ambiguity of eating food outside of the home illustrates that many youth are quite flexible with their definition of halal food and that these definitions are often negotiated among peers. Many young Muslims in Hong Kong avoid Chinese food altogether, while some frequently eat particular types of Chinese foods. By contrast, all the participants eat fast food, commonly McDonald's, but also including *dim sum* and halal food from Pakistani takeaways. As a result, the discussions about halal food focus on food prepared at home and the consumption of fast foods.

Through the issue of halal food we see young Muslims approaching their religious and cultural values in quite different ways, dealing with real issues of difference in pragmatic terms. In many cases the accounts highlight differences already noted with regard to class and gender, and similarly they illustrate the everyday social patterns and spaces youth encounter. In addition, much of what follows in this chapter provides some of the keenest insights into the everyday lives of young Muslims in Hong Kong. Halal food is one aspect of being a Muslim, but the topic of food itself encompasses a whole range of everyday scenarios. We learn much more about where these young people spend their time, who they are with when they eat, and what kind of a budget they have for food and social activities.

Where to eat?

Throughout Hong Kong there are a variety of different establishments that provide halal food products for cooking, and restaurants that cook and sell halal meals. In many cases these businesses are at their most concentrated in areas which Muslims frequent, often close to some of the established mosques. On Hong Kong Island there is a halal butcher in the Bowrington Road wet market in Causeway Bay. Currently, this is the only one on the island, although there have been others in the past such as one in Happy Valley. The Bowrington Road wet market is opposite Chan Tong Lane which houses the Chinese Muslim Cultural and Fraternal Society, which is itself approximately 150 metres away from the Wanchai Islamic Centre on Oi Kwan Road. At the Islamic centre there is a halal restaurant that is open daily, and in the vicinity there are a number of South Asian halal restaurants and Pakistani grocery stores. At one stage there was a popular halal dim sum restaurant close by on Morrison Hill Road, but it



Figure 7 The halal butcher at Bowrington Road Wet Market (photo by author)

is rumoured that the gambling debts of the *Hui* owner forced its closure. Around the Kowloon Mosque it is much the same story. Grocery stores and restaurants are numerous, particularly in the nearby Chungking Mansions where South Asian food stalls are scattered among DVD shops selling Bollywood and Nollywood movies and South Asian run mobile phone stores where one can purchase digital versions of the Qur'an to read 'on the go'. In smaller groupings throughout the territory, a variety of restaurants and grocery stores provide halal food in areas such as To Kwa Wan, Sham Shui Po, and Yuen Long. Some halal restaurants are located in the central business district and attract mainly non-Muslim customers. Examples are the popular Habibi restaurant that also sells foods to supermarkets, and Al Pasha which markets itself as serving 'Silk Road cuisine'. The latter establishment is actually owned by a Uyghur woman, who is a renowned 'oriental' dancer and occasional actress. The majority of the Muslims in the research tend to eat at the less expensive businesses in Wanchai and Tsim Sha Tsui. It is significant to note that the concentration of these businesses in specific areas means that for many Muslim youth, who may live and attend school away from these districts, obtaining halal food can at times be challenging.

'But yes, if it has pork in it, we won't buy it'

The most widely understood aspect of a halal diet is that pork is forbidden. For many Muslims old and young alike, abstinence from the consumption of pork is the only way in which they really observe halal food laws. Even among individuals who believe they are quite relaxed about halal food there is an ambiguity about what they feel is acceptable. In the Hong Kong context an uncertainty exists among Muslims, sometimes tacit, that the foods they consume do not have pork in them.

Qaaria follows halal food laws in a way that does not conflict with her engagement in the consumption and social patterns of contemporary girlhood (Harris 2004). Her explanation shows how the norms within her family have largely dictated how she chooses to follow halal guidelines.

Qaaria: We don't buy anything with pork in it. If it is chicken and doesn't have the pork in the ingredients list, we don't stress about eating it. But yes, if it has pork in it, we won't buy it.

Not 'stressing' about halal food is also a characteristic of Pari's approach to eating. When she is with her Chinese friends, she feels it is easy to eat halal food. Wherever she goes, there are both halal and *haraam* choices. For Pari, halal options are chicken or vegetarian dishes. This provides some indication of the degree to which she follows halal laws. Pari is not very concerned with how food is prepared or how meat is slaughtered. Some of her Pakistani friends at school are less flexible, however. She gives the example of dining at McDonald's where her friends argue that none of the meat in the burgers is halal. Pari finds that such attitudes are troublesome and she resents the need to be so concerned with what she sees as overbearing rules. It is circumstances such as eating with Pakistani peers that has made Pari develop a preference for Chinese friends over Pakistani ones. She is quite adamant that she is a Hong Kong person and appears to find the following of Pakistani Islamic cultural norms in Hong Kong peculiarly out of place.

Qaaria and Pari's approach to halal food is fundamentally a no-pork approach; it is a basic interpretation and allows them greater freedom in eating with their non-Muslim friends than the stricter interpretations of halal food laws to which many other young Muslims in the territory adhere. Both of these girls represent different social and cultural alignments, Qaaria being middle class and very Westernised has no Muslim peers and Pari, who is working class and schooled among many Pakistani peers, considers herself Chinese. Their cultural and social alignment is reflected in the way they choose to follow halal food laws and is strongly influenced by their family, but also, and importantly, peer and friendship groups.

Qaaria and Pari exhibit a *laissez-faire* attitude to halal food. Elisha, however, provides a more typical and average South Asian account of maintaining a halal diet in Hong Kong. The norms within her family extend beyond simply avoiding pork; if meat is not prepared correctly then they pursue other options. For Elisha the question of how the food is cooked is clearly important.

Elisha: We don't worry actually. Normally we just get what is halal and sometimes we get vegetarian food. We ask the restaurant to cook it all in vegetable oil.

Like the others, Elisha states that she does not worry too much, but clearly goes to greater efforts than Qaaria and Pari to ensure what she consumes is halal. Collectively, their accounts highlight how ambiguous the issue of halal food is as they all consider themselves fairly laid-back and carefree about how they follow their halal dietary obligations. Each girl has very different ways of finding and selecting halal food.

There is a very clear association between Chinese food and pork among the majority of Muslims I have spoken to during my research. Qaaria states that it is sometimes difficult to find halal food in Hong Kong because Chinese people 'love pork'. For Dil the distinction regarding Chinese food is clear: it is simply not halal and therefore Muslims must avoid it.

Dil: I don't eat Chinese food. Muslim people can only eat halal, and Chinese food often uses oil that doesn't contain halal ingredients.

Paul: So tell me about keeping halal in Hong Kong, is that quite hard?

Dil: I think so. Usually restaurants don't use vegetable oil. Even McDonald's didn't until recently. McDonald's are now using vegetable oil after some non-Chinese people requested for using vegetable oil.

Dil explains how even though Muslims are not vegetarian they sometimes have to eat as vegetarians do because they can only eat meat that has been slaughtered in a halal manner. Hong Kong is a pervasively meat-eating territory. I have on a number of occasions found that some vegetarian meals come with non-vegetarian dressings or condiments. Dil states that as the majority of food in Hong Kong is prepared by non-Muslims; it often makes her family dine as vegetarians when eating outside of their home. When Dil's family eats out they tend to only visit Pakistani or Indian restaurants as it is those places that serve reliably halal food.

Franky also sees Chinese food as questionable. His outlook, which is shared by Iftikhar and Mahmood, is that all Western food is acceptable. This he justifies because Western people are *al Kitab* or 'of the book'. This phrase is used to show that Jews, Christians, and Muslims share the same monotheistic origins in the covenants that are revealed in the Torah, Bible and Qur'an. Food that is prepared by people from these backgrounds, Western food, is halal for Franky. So fast food chains in Hong Kong like McDonald's, KFC, and Pizza Hut, are all acceptable places to eat. He will eat Chinese food, but carefully chooses only to eat noodles and rice with vegetables or fish.

Gender difference

Generally, access to halal food between Pakistani participants differs across genders. The Pakistani young men often eat out at South Asian restaurants near either the Wanchai or Kowloon Mosques. They also often get halal takeaways from these establishments with their friends. In contrast, the majority of Pakistani girls eat out only with their family. Though in some cases they eat at McDonald's, a choice that seems to be as much about easy access as it is about avoiding being seen hanging out with Pakistani boys. Access to halal food for them is more typically represented in discussions of purchasing groceries to cook at home. Jumana does not eat Chinese food and believes that halal food is easy to get because the Islamic community has shops and businesses to provide such services (Islamic Union of Hong Kong 2007, Hong Kong Tourism Board 2008). Despite feeling that there is easy access to halal food, Jumana lives some considerable distance away from their local halal butcher at Bowrington Road market. Although it is practical for her housewife mother to travel this distance to do the grocery shopping daily, it is a stark contrast to the lifestyle of many other Hong Kong families who shop locally and access convenience goods and stores regularly. Access provides greater context to understand how young Muslims and their families encounter and engage with space. It is not uncommon for Muslim families to live far away from Pakistani stores, mosques, and halal butchers. Unlike Britain, for example, where Muslims often live in particular suburban areas (Amin 2002, p. 962), Muslims in Hong Kong are not concentrated in any one locale; they are dispersed throughout the territory. Access to halal food highlights spatial gender differences that we shall encounter again in Chapter 11. Young Pakistani men have a different experience of halal food in Hong Kong to Pakistani young women. These gender differences are most distinctly a South Asian experience and quite unlike the experiences of *Hui* in the territory.

McHaraam

The popularity of McDonald's in Hong Kong is widely recognised with over 200 of the restaurants dotted across the territory. The subject of halal food with many of the participants led to some reference of eating or avoiding eating particular items at McDonald's. There is much debate

among Muslims in Hong Kong as to what, if anything, is halal in these widely accessible and inexpensive fast food restaurants. Both Dil and Elisha say that they eat the fries that are sold at McDonald's as they are now cooked in vegetable oil.

Elisha: We normally get the fries and we tell them to fry them in vegetable oil.

In 2000 the *South China Morning Post* reported on comments made from the Muslim community about the oil in which McDonald's fries were cooked. Mohamed Alli Din, then chairman of the United Muslim Association of Hong Kong argued that McDonald's in Singapore and Malaysia ensured food was halal and so should McDonald's in Hong Kong (Lo 2000). A letter to the same newspaper in May of 2000 requested that some halal food should be put on offer at Hong Kong's international airport, which is regularly voted the best in the world. The letter made the particular request that McDonald's provide some vegetarian options.

McDonald's state that within Hong Kong none of their food is certified halal, however, they point out that some of the food they offer is vegetarian. It must be added that while all this information is obtainable through contacting the corporation, it is not readily available to customers in the same way in which their food is. This confusion over what Muslims can eat is still apparent in the way respondents like Elisha request fries to be cooked in vegetable oil. McDonald's in Singapore received halal certification in 1992 and signs on the doors of the restaurants explicitly inform the customers of what to expect (McDonald's Singapore 2011). McDonald's in Hong Kong remains *haram* and unlike Singapore Hong Kong's halal certification, provided by the Trustees of Islamic Community Fund, is not widely used. To date, they have only awarded certification and inspected restaurants who have requested validation. There is no government body to oversee the use of halal labelling in food shops, butchers, and mainstream food chains such as McDonald's. The concern that arises from such a situation is that any business or product can claim to be halal in Hong Kong. A number of issues regarding false labelling of halal produce, and of varying interpretations of halal guidelines at Hong Kong restaurants, have highlighted the enduring ambiguity that Muslims have with regard to their food choices in the territory. Arif who works in Chungking Mansions states that there are a number of businesses that claim to be

halal when they are not. He declares that you have to be careful, particularly near where he lives in Tuen Mun.

One example of the contested nature of halal food in Hong Kong is presented in a picture taken at Ebenezer's in Wanchai. This popular takeaway which offers kebabs, curries, and pizzas is certified as an halal establishment. All the meats they use are halal, even their Hawaiian pizza has turkey instead of ham. But at the front counter next to the halal certificate a collection of different canned and bottled beers are displayed. A sign requests that customers do not consume the alcohol on the premises. But this does not seem to deter people from doing so. It is also not difficult to find drunken customers in the takeaway at any time of day. For some Muslims this is unacceptable. This would simply not be an issue in an Islamic country as there would be no alcohol on sale, but also there would be no halal certification required. Thus the ambiguity that accompanies the issue of halal food in Hong Kong can be understood as simply an element of the social complexity that Muslims as minorities are living in. Alcohol is an element of everyday life for a number of Muslims. Franky observes that among the Muslims he knows at Chungking Mansions there are always some that can be spotted drinking beer or smoking cannabis. The presence of bottled alcohol is thus not as contentious as the question of pork meat, food sourcing, and cross-contamination.



Figure 8 Halal and *haram* on display in a Wanchai takeaway (photo by author)

One of the key issues for Muslims in Hong Kong is the lack of government or big business recognition with regard to their special dietary requirement. McDonald's move to make vegetarian products such as fries vegetarian in production signals an acknowledgement of vegetarian consumers as a valuable sector in which minor concessions can increase or at least retain profits. Statistics from the Hong Kong Vegetarian Society estimate that there are around 80,000 committed adult vegetarians in Hong Kong (2008). It is noteworthy that numbers of Muslims in Hong Kong exceed the estimated numbers of vegetarians in the territory by three times. McDonald's however, is careful about how it adapts locally and halal food does not seem to be a priority on their agenda. Similarly overseeing halal food certification is not a priority of the Hong Kong government who, despite growing numbers of Muslims in the territory, are not concerned with legislation that supports ethnic minority interests. Perhaps the candid truth of the issue rests in the economic profile of the Muslim majority of Hong Kong. The largest group is Indonesian foreign domestic workers who are characteristically not wealthy. Many Pakistanis are also working class and like Indonesians, they have their own businesses to provide them with their own cultural foods. They are not regarded as an important business target for the necessary adaptations to be considered worthwhile.

Regardless of the ambiguities of McDonald's, it is still a popular choice with Muslims in the territory. Franky told me that 'Pakistani guys always come to McDonald's and choose number five', the *Filet-O-Fish* sandwich. They say that choice is safe as fish is halal. This is confirmed by 13-year-old Murtaza who says that the fish burger is the only safe thing to eat at McDonald's. On this point Qatadah elaborated that Muslims were allowed to order this set but must remove the cheese before they eat the burger. When I asked him why the cheese is unsuitable, Qatadah replied only that his religious teacher had told him not to eat it.

On the subject of McDonald's Iftikhar swooned when describing the food there. 'I love McDonald's,' he declared, 'I would happily eat there for every meal.' Reviewing the responses of the Muslims in this research it is clear that Iftikhar is not alone. There is no shortage of Muslims at McDonald's in Causeway Bay each Sunday. The restaurant on Yee Woo Street, a stone's throw from Victoria Park, bustles with Indonesian foreign domestic workers during their weekly day off. So it seems that

even without halal certification, and even with accompanying ambiguity regarding meat, cheese, and cooking oil, McDonald's is still a popular choice for Muslims in Hong Kong.

Eating local, concessions and complexities

Generally, the Pakistani participants (with the distinct exception of Pari) are quite vigilant about keeping halal laws. Although they often eat at McDonald's, they rarely eat Chinese food. There are, however, a number of circumstances in which they feel comfortable eating certain Chinese foods. Sahira, for example, eats only the Chinese food that her father cooks. He, having lived in Hong Kong for over 20 years, has learnt from friends and colleagues how to prepare a number of Chinese recipes and uses only halal ingredients. Sahira's experience of Chinese food is solely that of the fish her father cooks in the Cantonese style he was taught by co-workers, and it has become a meal that she has also learnt to prepare.

Hadaf, in contrast, avoids Chinese food altogether, emphatically stating on two occasions that he does not eat any type of Chinese food, 'Chinese food I don't like any. Nothing, nothing at all.' He also underlined this when offering advice at the close of our interview about what he would tell other Muslims about life in Hong Kong. Despite his avoidance of Chinese food, Hadaf feels that non-Chinese should take the time to talk and get to know Chinese people and enjoy their culture. This is an interesting contrast as the celebration of Chinese food in Hong Kong is a key way to enjoy, show respect for, and become involved with Chinese culture. One of the standard greetings in Cantonese poses the question, 'Have you eaten yet?' It is a pleasantry that gives the acquaintance the opportunity to discuss a shared love: food. In this light, Hadaf provides a reification of everyday hybridity. It is remarkable because he rejects one aspect of Hong Kong Chinese culture that is very important. He utterly rejects Chinese food considering it entirely *haram*, yet he proudly encourages other people to enjoy getting to know Chinese people and understand their culture. The celebration of Chinese culture through food is entirely absent in Hadaf's lived multicultural experience. His hybridity indicates that people of different cultures can interact and mix without conflict even if they reject major aspects of each other's cultures. Therefore, the

challenges that Muslims face in Hong Kong with regard to food are also important to read in the context of food and multiculturalism.

The use of food as a signifier of 'cultural capital', is something that Hage (1997, p. 145) argues is a common way in which people feel they are engaging with other cultures and being multicultural themselves. Hadaf's commentary reveals how superficial such claims of multiculturalism can be. He represents an engagement with Hong Kong culture that appears to be deeper than that of dabbling with Chinese culture by doing things like taking *yum cha* on a Sunday or giving *lai see* at Chinese New Year. This is not the level at which Hadaf is involved. He respects Chinese people and culture; he speaks Cantonese and watches local television. Yet, he refuses to eat any Chinese food. In day-to-day exchanges he is surrounded by Chinese people and Chinese culture and he remains a committed Muslim.

In Hong Kong, a number of Chinese festivals are celebrated as public holidays throughout the year. These sit alongside public holidays for national days and Christian religious celebrations such as Easter and Christmas and also the Buddhist celebration of Buddha's birthday. Many of the young Muslims eat mooncakes during the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival which is a key part of the celebration. Waqi, Elisha, and Pari all enjoy doing this either with friends or family. Aseelah, in contrast, says that when she celebrates the festival, she avoids mooncakes as she believes they have pork in them. This example shows that while young Muslims may have different ways of following halal rules there is also often a lack of consensus on what foods are clearly *haram*. While a number of participants will eat meat that has not been slaughtered following halal guidelines, all (apart from some Indonesians) report that they avoid pork. Although Aseelah rejects mooncakes, she does enjoy eating Chinese *dim sum* fast foods like fishballs, but worries about eating them as some of her friends say they are not halal. I questioned her further about how there are many different opinions on what is halal.

Aseelah: If it's got pork it's not allowed that is the main thing. If food is cooked in dishes that previously were used to cook pork, that is not halal. But how are we able to know how some foods are made? The machines that pack food, are they used to cook other things? If you know it, if you can see pork next to fish then you can tell this is not halal at all. But if you don't know, if you can't see, then you can't be blamed for not knowing.

Cross-contamination for *Hui* in China is quite serious and Muslims perceive that even the cleaning of utensils used in the preparation or serving of pork cannot rid them of their pork contamination (Gillette 2000, pp. 125–130). This is a concern for Indonesian Amisha as she often has to prepare food that she eats alongside that of the food for her Chinese employer. She tries to keep surfaces clean and to use different knives for her food and the pork she prepares for her boss. Ultimately, Amisha does not mind handling pork, but she is vigilant not to eat it. Aseelah summed up her criteria for halal food by saying that ‘as long as I can’t see any pork I am not bothered by it’. But this is contradicted by her rejection of mooncakes which do not clearly have pork in them. Many of the youth enjoy eating mooncakes during the lantern festival, and they make sure that they buy cakes that have no meat ingredients. Aseelah’s choice of halal food remains ambiguous with reference to *dim sum* fishballs stating that she used to eat them until a friend told her that they are not halal. As our discussion on the topic closed, she concluded that ‘[i]t’s made of fish so I think its halal.’ She justifies this in reference to the Qur’an which states that if you eat *haram* food accidentally it can not be held against you (Qur’an S 16:115).

Dealing with this ambiguity, Fazeelah decided to take matters into her own hands with regard to a popular *dim sum* snack, fish *siu maai* (魚肉燒賣) which is widely available in convenience stores such as 7-Eleven and Circle K and also street foodstalls. On suspicion of the ingredients which listed no pork content she took the food to a laboratory and organised a test to find if any pork traces were present. She found pork fat in the *siu maai* used in her samples and she now abstains from eating them. Fazeelah is arguably the most informed and pragmatic regarding the consumption of halal food. She does not really have any conflicts about the ambiguity of different types of foods and in the case of her suspicion regarding the *siu maai* she was able to investigate in order to satisfy her curiosity. Fazeelah tends to eat vegetarian options the majority of the time so she can avoid *haram* food and the accompanying complications she encounters when explaining her peculiar diet to her non-Muslim Chinese work colleagues. Her mother also prepares home-cooked mooncakes during the Mid-Autumn Festival using vegetable oil. Fazeelah and Benny are the only participants in the research who speak Cantonese as their first language and can read Chinese. Fazeelah is in a privileged position

to make precise enquiries regarding food choices. Some of the ambiguity of halal food in Hong Kong is made more difficult by the fact that many Muslims have a limited proficiency in speaking Cantonese and generally very little ability in reading Chinese characters.

Eating local food is thus connected to a variety of issues. For Sahira Chinese halal food is something that her father is able to provide, while Aseelah chooses to eat Cantonese fish street snacks because she perceives fish to be a safe choice. As we saw in Chapter 3, Jawa eats a little bit of pork during meals with her Chinese employer. Among all of the respondents it was the Indonesian foreign domestic workers that ate the most local Hong Kong Chinese food. It was also this group that had the least ability to choose what they ate in day to day scenarios. For Hadaf though, all Chinese food is unacceptable, and he encourages his friends to be cautious about what they eat. Fazeelah, in contrast, is able to use her Chinese language skills to make informed choices about what is halal. As a collection, these accounts provide an insight into some of the accompanying issues surrounding Chinese food for young Muslims in Hong Kong.

Halal Hong Kong

Through the everyday experiences of food, of following a halal diet, we gather an even deeper understanding of the lives of young Muslims in Hong Kong. The challenges that they face on a daily basis, navigating Chinese food, choosing which items and which establishments are safe for them to eat in provide an interesting and little known image of Muslims in Hong Kong. As religious minorities, and specifically Muslims, their experiences of life in the territory are not determined by their Islamic culture. While it undoubtedly provides certain obstacles and challenges, we see through the topic of food that Muslim youth are animated by such quotidian issues of where to eat, how to share food with friends, and even how to participate in local Chinese festivities. This is a refreshing change from accounts that persist with the notion that Muslims are marginal social subjects as religious and political minorities and that this marginal status combined with Islam is a catalyst for radicalisation.

The issue of halal food is an interesting one to discuss because it provides an understanding of a unique aspect of the everyday experience

of Hong Kong's hybrid culture. The participants reveal that they are able to make their own choices regarding how they follow halal food laws, but it also shows how there is no consensus over certain types of food and the extent to which they should be concerned about what they are eating. Halal food in Hong Kong is therefore an issue that represents the ambiguity and ambivalence of the lived intercultural encounter of being a Muslim in Hong Kong. Consistently, the issue of halal food has been cited by the respondents as an obstacle and challenge in living in Hong Kong where meat is a pervasive ingredient in many foods. The lifestyle and culture of the participants is also typical of other contemporary urban youth. Many like to access convenience and fast foods when with friends. Peers are therefore an important influence on what and where they choose to eat, but so too are religious teachers and employers. The participants show that they learn and consult with friends about what is and is not halal, highlighting how they are forging their own Islamic cultural norms, apropos of life in Hong Kong.

In the next section of this book, the focus moves away from explicit themes of religious practice and takes a closer look at some of the social themes important to young Muslims and their everyday lives. The following chapters explore language, identity, racism, and the use of urban space by young Muslims.

