

Towards a Mandarin-based da’wah model: Bridging cultural identity and Islamic communication in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Mandarin-speaking Chinese converts often face challenges in a multicultural and multilingual country in Malaysia. It is difficult for them to access Islamic teaching in their first language (Mandarin) since most Da’wah (Islamic missionary) activities are conducted in Malaysia either in Malay or Arabic. Language barriers, cultural misconceptions, and dual-identity conflicts hinder their understanding of Islamic knowledge, and actively involve them in Da’wah activities, integration into the local muslim community. This study intends to propose the Mandarin-Based Da’wah Model (MBDM) to overcome these challenges. This study adopted a qualitative research design. Data collected through interviews with Chinese Muslim converts and Da’wah practitioners in Malaysia. The four main challenges identified from the thematic analysis revealed four main challenges: (1) the shortage of localised Islamic materials in Mandarin, (2) linguistic and terminology barriers, and (3) diverse linguistic backgrounds among Malaysian Chinese. (4) The Limitations of modern Da’wah Delivery methods. The three key pillars included in the proposed MBDM are: developing localised and easy-to-access resources, training multilingual and culturally competent preachers, and promoting cultural integration with ongoing support for converts. The MBDM is tailored for the often-overlooked Malaysian Chinese Muslim community, using the language and culture they’re familiar with to communicate and understand their unique situation. This model aims to deepen religious understanding, strengthen Muslim identities, and enhance ethic harmony in Malaysia. In the future, the model will be tested in real scenarios among diverse bilingual scholars, practitioners, and digital content creators to assess its effectiveness.

Keywords: Mandarin-Based Da’wah Model (MBDM); Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts; Language barriers ; Cultural sensitivity; Digital Islamic outreach

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multilingual and multicultural country, but Islamic Da’wah here is still mostly carried out in Malay, the national language, or in Arabic, the language of the Qur’an (Abdul Hamid and Mydin 2021; Ikhwan 2024). This creates a barrier for Mandarin-speaking Chinese Muslims, which limits their access to Islamic knowledge, makes it harder for them to join Da’wah activities, and can leave them feeling less

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connected to the wider Muslim community in Malaysia.

There is a steady growth of the Chinese convert Muslim population in Malaysia. The study (Chuah et al., 2020) found that the number increased from 57,221 people in 2000 to an estimated 80,000–90,000 people by 2020. Even though there are no official records from Malaysia, according to the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MCMA), the estimated number of this group is between 60,000 and 100,00. Ng et al. (2024) in their study found that these converts express a feeling of distance from their original Chinese community after they convert to Islam; at the same time, they are also struggling to be fully accepted by the Malay-Muslim majority. The majority of their language in daily life is either Mandarin or other Chinese dialects, such as Hokkien, Cantonese, or Hakka. Many of them do not understand or have little knowledge of Arabic, and are not so fluent in Malay, which is the national language of Malaysia. Because of these language barriers, they struggle even more to fully embrace their Muslim identity, confidently practise their faith, and correct misperceptions about Islam among their family and community.

Malay converts in Malaysia are facing challenges: a lack of Islamic resources and trained bilingual Da'wah practitioners who are proficient in both Mandarin and Malay, which creates a huge communication gap. Because of this, for many Malaysian Chinese converts makes it difficult to discuss Islam with their families and communities- especially when the Malaysian Chinese community often has a perception that "converting to Islam means giving up their Chinese identity to 'become Malay.'" Such misperception may leave converts torn between their faith and cultural roots, sometimes even harming their family relationships.

To address some of these barriers, the present study proposes the Mandarin-Based Da'wah Model (MBDM). The model integrates the language and cultural sensitivity that is designed to use Mandarin as the main medium for Islamic teachings for the Malaysian Chinese converts. The model is designed to break down the language barriers, clarify cross-cultural misunderstandings, and encourage Chinese convert Muslims to be more engaged in the Islamic community in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Da'wah in the Malaysian Context

Da'wah efforts must be carefully tailored to meet the diverse needs of each community in a multiethnic and multilingual society like Malaysia, because it is not only an activity that promotes Islamic teachings, but it also helps people build better lives. Ansori (2024) argued that doing Da'wah in Malaysia is not just about conveying religious values; it is more like a bridge to help people improve their everyday welfare, promote social justice, and enable all citizens to participate in the development of the nation, and move forward to a brighter future.

With the development of new technology in the Modern era, preachers actively utilise the modern platforms such as TikTok and Facebook to do Da'wah to both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences (Ansori, 2024). With decades of Da'wah efforts, this modern approach places more emphasis on addressing real-world needs, such as helping flood refugees in their reconstruction efforts and supporting immigrants. Concurrently, alongside fostering spiritual development, it strives to promote fairness and build the bridges of interfaith understanding (Ansori, 2024; Zunnabli et al., 2023). It can be said that contemporary Da'wah has moved beyond solely spreading Islamic knowledge; it is now dedicated to fostering interfaith understanding and greater social harmony.

According to the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA), there are nearly 100000 total population of Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia currently. However, due to a lack of bilingual proficient preachers, the Da'wah work specifically targeting this community has not yet been fully developed. There are no adequate teaching resources to support this particular group. Most Da'wah resources are in languages which they either do not understand (Arabic) or are not fluent in (Malay). There are limited Islamic resources in Mandarin. Due to the language barriers, this group is struggling to fully understand their faith, actively engage themselves in religious practices, and convey the message to their original family or community. They find themselves struggling to fully integrate into Muslim communities, and at the same time are distanced from their original Chinese family and community due to misperception after their conversion (Ng et al., 2024).

Language As a Critical Factor in Da'wah

In effective Da'wah, Language plays an important role in delivering messages; it serves as a bridge between communicators and audiences, to bring speakers and listeners closer (Rumra & Hakis, 2023). The effectiveness

Towards a Mandarin-based da'wah model: Bridging cultural identity and Islamic communication in Malaysia

of Da'wah depends on sending the religious message clearly to the audience. Using the native language of the audience, except for holding the original text of the Quran in Da'wah activities, can help the audience better understand the message and actively engage in the activities (Naufal & Khatami, 2023). Empirical studies have demonstrated that employing listeners' native language in Da'wah can improve their emotional resonance, overcome cultural barriers, and also ensure the message is relevant. (Toan, 2024; Salikin et al., 2024)

In Malaysia, the growth of social platforms from China, including Xiaohongshu, Dou yin, and WeChat, has led increase in learning Mandarin among younger generations, especially among ethnic Malaysian Chinese youth. This group frequently use Mandarin in their daily life compared to the older generation. This trend provides a new opportunity to reframe Da'wah strategies. However, in practice, there is a shortage of trained preachers who are equipped with bilingual proficiency and understanding of multiculturalism to grasp this new trend to engage more Mandarin-speaking audiences.

Many empirical studies (Alon, 2016; Naamy, 2022; Samri, 2022; Hidayat et al., 2024) have found that language barriers in Da'wah not only cause translation issues but also extend social and religious rifts among Muslim audiences. As Samri (2022) discovered, when messages fail to translate, the words get lost, and the entire meaning can also be distorted. In this situation, both speakers and listeners are frustrated not unable to fully understand the text. Therefore, it is practical to provide Da'wah using Mandarin to the Chinese Muslim community of Malaysia. When you are using someone's native tongue to communicate spiritual truth, you are showing respect for their cultural identity.

METHODOLOGY

This study was qualitative research aimed at investigating the language and cultural struggles of Mandarin-speaking Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia. The Mandarin-Based Da'wah Model (MBDM) was developed through exploration. A needs analysis and a model-development approach were used to identify gaps in current practices in the field of Da'wah and to propose solutions based on empirical evidence. By using a qualitative study unable researchers to capture the participants' life experiences and point of view, to help make Islamic outreach more effective in Mandarin Mandarin-speaking community in Malaysia.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The five Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts were purposively selected to participate in the study. Participants were purposively selected based on three criteria: (1) being either a Chinese Muslim convert or actively involved in Da'wah targeting Chinese communities; (2) having at least three years of experience engaging with Islamic education or outreach activities; and (3) having sufficient Mandarin proficiency to discuss linguistic and cultural issues. Recruitment was conducted through referrals from the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA) and Da'wah practitioners known to the researchers. Among these five participants (three male, two female), aged between 35 and 60 years. All participants have a minimum of three years' experience in Islamic practice or Da'wah activities. The choice of participant selection is to ensure the study can provide diverse and focused perspectives, which are relevant to the study objectives. The interview was conducted online via Google Meet, which suited the convenience. The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent, with each interview lasting between 45minutes to 90 minutes. The interview questions included in the study were the following:

- The availability and quality of Islamic teaching materials in Mandarin for the Malaysian Chinese Muslim community
- What gaps or limitations have been observed in the existing Islamic resources in Malaysia?
- What are the main challenges Malaysian Chinese Muslims face in accessing Islamic teaching resources due to language barriers?
- What types of Mandarin Islamic resources (e.g. books, videos, apps) are most needed by the Malaysian Chinese Muslim community?
- If they have any intention of developing Islamic resources in Mandarin.
- The ideal Mandarin Da'wah Model for this specific community.

Before conducting the interview, researchers explained to participants the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and they were allowed to withdraw at any stage. The recording data were then transcribed using an AI tool, turboscribe.ai. The transcripts were checked by language experts to ensure their validity. After checking the transcribed data were then analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework (see Figure 1) proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). Steps included: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating the initial codes, (3) creating themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining and naming themes, (6) writing theme analysis



Figure 1. Six-phase thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

The themes were verified through peer debriefing and participant feedback to enhance credibility and validity. Before conducting the interview, participants were informed of the purpose of conducting the interview, that their participation was voluntary, and that all the data collected would be confidential and stored and used for research purposes only.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis addressed

1. The needs and impacts of developing a Mandarin Da'wah module for the Malaysian Chinese Muslim community.
2. key elements of a Mandarin-Based Da'wah Model (MBDM) to promote Islamic outreach among Mandarin speakers.

The several interrelated Themes are identified through Thematic analysis as follows:

1. Needs and Impact of a Mandarin Da'wah Module

Theme 1: Scarcity of Localised Resources

All Participants in the interviews highlighted that there are limited and inadequate Islamic resources in Mandarin that can be found in Malaysia. Some of the materials they are currently using are mostly imported from China. Those materials are not tailored for Malaysians; they often find that mismatched to Malaysian cultural and linguistic contexts. As one participant explained,

“Actually, the situation in Malaysia is that resources for Islamic teaching in Mandarin are quite lacking, because the Islamic teaching resources we use now are all given to us by Chinese Muslims; we are quite lacking”. (participants A)

This reliance extends to human guidance, as local Mandarin-speaking preachers are few and often lack advanced religious training, as a third participant explained, which is a skills gap within the local community.

Towards a Mandarin-based da'wah model: Bridging cultural identity and Islamic communication in Malaysia

“No matter what, we still need the help of Chinese Muslims because our local Chinese Muslims' abilities are limited, and besides, there aren't many with good Chinese language skills”. (participant C)

This aligns with the studies of Chuah et al. (2020) and Mukarramah (2022). Chuah et al. (2020) noted that Islamic education in Malaysia is predominantly conducted in Malay or Arabic, leaving Mandarin-speaking converts underserved. Mukarramah (2022) conducted a study and identified that the lack of Mandarin instructional materials integrated with Islamic values, especially in Islamic educational curricula. The shortage of experienced multilingual preachers also makes Islamic teaching more challenging for the Mandarin-speaking community. Therefore, the gaps in both resources and local expertise emphasize the urgent need to develop a Mandarin Da'wah module tailored to the Malaysian context.

Theme 2: Language and Terminology Challenges

Currently, many Mandarin resources used by some of Malaysia's Chinese Muslim organisations are imported from China. These imported materials normally use more complex wording and Islamic terms that are not commonly known. This is because these Mandarin Islamic resources are written for people who were born into Muslim families and have grown up seeing Islamic practices by their parents at home. They are familiar with and easy to understand complex terminologies. However, for many Malaysian Chinese, their Mandarin proficiency is not at an advanced level, and as new Muslim converts, they usually have little or no prior Islamic knowledge. Therefore, the same terms can be confusing without additional explanation; they need simpler language and clear explanations to help them understand the basic Islamic concepts.

As one participant explained

“Their level of Chinese is quite high... their language is deeper.” (Participant A)

Ng et al. (2024) discovered a similar finding that using more complex language in resources can make it content more difficult to understand; therefore, simple language and terminology are needed to help people learn. Therefore, a module needs to be developed that can present the content in an easy-to-understand way. To make these resources effective, the solution is clear that accessibility of the Mandarin Da'wah Module is not just about language choice, but about carefully adapting the linguistic complexity and terminology to ensure the message of Islam is understood by the Malaysian Chinese community.

Theme 3: Diverse Linguistic Backgrounds:

The study found that the diverse language background of Malaysians is a key issue. As a multiracial country, Malaysia has different types of schools, such as Chinese-medium, national, and international schools with different media of instruction. Among them, students from Chinese-medium schools may not be proficient in Malay, so teaching in Mandarin is particularly important.

“If they come from a Chinese school, their Malay is usually not very good. So, if we use Malay to teach them, they might not understand... For them, it's better to use Mandarin.” (participant C)

This demonstrates that a one-size-fits-all approach using only Malay or English would exclude a large portion of the target audience. Therefore, an effective Mandarin Da'wah module must be multilingual, moving beyond a single-language approach to meet the community where they are most comfortable learning.

Theme 4: Modernisation of Materials

To engage contemporary audiences, the study discovered that there is a pressing need to move beyond traditional books and develop resources in modern formats. The primary need is for mobile applications (apps) and e-books, as these are the preferred media for the younger generation. As one participant asserted

“I think the most important thing now is the 'app'. Because now everyone has a phone.” (Participant C)

To develop an effective Mandarin Da'wah module, we should consider the hybrid approach. This

strategy allows us to attract younger generations, who are more familiar with new technology and who prefer to go online. At the same time, we should also retain traditional formats that are familiar to the older generation. This finding aligns with Ar-Ridho et al. (2023) and Haditama et al. (2024), who highlight the global trend of integrating a “digital-first” approach. They note that online platforms play a crucial role in making Da’wah more accessible and boosting public participation.

The well-designed Mandarin-based Da’wah module allows Malaysian Chinese converts to learn and understand Islamic knowledge in their native language. It helps them take pride in being a Muslim and feel confident, while also providing clear guidance as they start their religious journey. Beyond supporting individual growth, the module also enables converts to introduce Islam to people around them. At the same time, it helps build communication bridges between different ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Key Features of the Mandarin-Based Da’wah Model (MBDM)

Through the thematic analysis of interview data, this study presents the Mandarin-based Da’wah Model (MBDM), which is designed for the Mandarin-speaking community in Malaysia. The model addresses the lack of Islamic materials in Mandarin and qualified bilingual preachers and also accommodates the unique linguistic and cultural context of Malaysian Chinese society. The model includes three key components to facilitate practical implementation.

1) Resource Development and Accessibility

A key component of the model is to create the relevant, clear, and accessible Islamic material for Mandarin-speaking Malaysian Chinese Muslims. The material focused on contextualised basic content, which includes the Digital-first approach. There is an urgent need to develop digital Islamic content in clear and simple terms for the Malaysian Chinese context. Those contents include translating the core Islamic texts into simplified Mandarin. The initial focus should be on producing fundamental content with basic Islamic knowledge for new converts, such as guidebooks, online videos which can easily guide them in their daily practices. With the modern trend, priority should be given to developing mobile applications and e-books, as these are more accessible to the wider and younger audience who are more active online. However, developing printed material remains important for older individuals or those who are more comfortable with it.

2) Human Capital and Competency

The effectiveness of Da’wah is heavily reliant on the individuals carrying it out. To find suitable person in this work requires someone who has rich Islamic knowledge, is fluent in Mandarin, and at the same time has mutual understanding of Chinese culture. We should put many efforts to identify, train and support such individuals.

The interviews highlight this significant gap, where many who are actively engaged in Da’wah lack proficiency in Mandarin, and many Mandarin speakers lack understanding of Islamic knowledge. Therefore, working together with Da’wah organizations such as JAKIM and MACMA, educational institutions, qualified individuals can create a stronger system to check the resources and produce more reliable materials.

We should not use a one-size-fits-all method anymore. Malaysian Chinese Muslim with diverse educational background (educated in Mandarin, or in Malay or English). Our Islamic teaching should be more flexible and focus on people. In practical, in classroom teaching should mix with Mandarin, Malay and English to ensure everyone in the class is actually following and understand the content.

3) Cultural and Social Integration

Da’wah efforts must be sensitive to the sociocultural dynamics of the Malaysian Chinese community. The main obstacle of the widespread belief among the community in Malaysian is that Islam is a “Malay religion”. This misconception often leads to social stigma and significant family resistance. Therefore, Mandarin-based Da’wah material and approaches must address these issues. They need clarify the universal message of Islam, convert to Islam does not require erasing one’s Chinese culture heritage or family ties.

Effective Da’wah should act as a bridge to promote mutual understanding between the Chinese and Malay communities, and emphasis on shared values such as compassion, family, and honesty. Sharing relatable, real-life stories of individuals from similar backgrounds can make the message far more accessible and impactful than abstract or rigid presentations.

Towards a Mandarin-based da'wah model: Bridging cultural identity and Islamic communication in Malaysia

Effective Da'wah should provide strong support system for new converts. It is essential for new Muslims who may face challenges in practice Islam and social integration. This includes providing guidance on daily rituals and creating a welcoming community to prevent feelings of isolation.

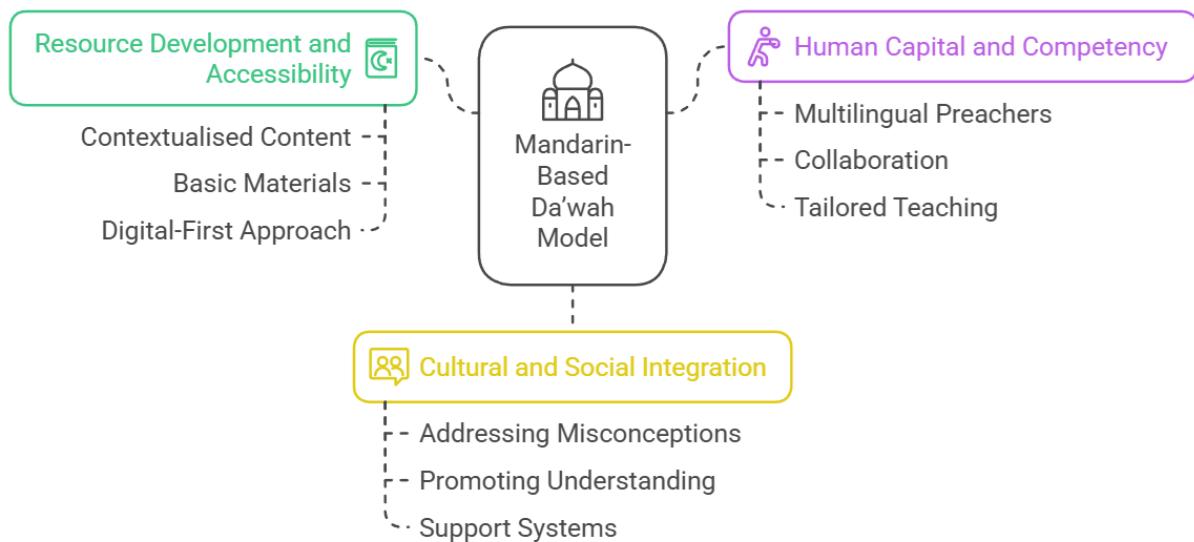


Figure 2. Mandarin-Based Da'wah Model (MBDM)

These findings highlight an important shift in how we approach effective Islamic outreach in a 21st-century multicultural context. It is noticeably clear that modern Islamic outreach is no longer just about delivering a religious message; it is more about doing Da'wah in ways that are accessible, culturally aware, and emotionally supportive. The experience of Mandarin-speaking Chinese Muslims highlights this perfectly. They remind us that to truly resonate in a society as diverse as Malaysia, we must leave behind monolingual and culturally rigid approaches. Instead, we need to embrace communication that is as multilingual and culturally responsive as the communities we seek to engage.

Malaysia faces a critical shortage of local Mandarin-speaking Da'wah educators, which highly limits the development of good-quality Mandarin Islamic resources. The absence of localised material in return stifles the growth of local talents within the Malaysian Chinese Muslim community. This creates a cycle where the community relies heavily on external resources from China. Solving this problem requires producing localised Mandarin Islamic resources by simplifying Mandarin and clarifying Islamic terms, and making materials accessible to those from various educational systems (Chinese schools, national schools, international schools) whose primary language proficiency differs. Create mobile-friendly content for tech-savvy younger converts by providing clear, universally framed Islamic teachings in Mandarin. The module can proactively counter these misconceptions and foster better intercultural understanding.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the linguistic and cultural barriers faced by Chinese Muslim converts in Malaysia. The study proposed the Mandarin-Based Da'wah Model (MBDM) to provide a practical and culturally relevant model for Islamic outreach. The findings show the existence of such deficiencies as the absence of localised resources, the difficulty of language and terminology, the various language experiences and backgrounds of the individuals, and the need for contemporary means of dissemination.

The proposed MBDM meets these challenges in three headings: (1) Development and availability of resources, (2) Human capital and capabilities, and (3) Cultural and social integration. The development of MBDM, which integrates Chinese values as well as simpler terms and language, through the collaboration of multilingual preachers coming from different backgrounds, in person or online, seeks to make it easier for them to understand their beliefs, enhance their self-identification and encourage connection with the other communities of Malaysia.

The primary contribution of this study lies in offering an evidence-based, context-specific framework for Da'wah in multilingual and multicultural environments. It demonstrates that meaningful religious engagement requires linguistic inclusivity and cultural adaptation, thereby providing actionable insights for religious institutions, educators, and community organisations seeking to improve outreach to Mandarin-speaking communities in Malaysia.

The research contributes to the field with a legitimate framework for Da'wah in various linguistic and cultural contexts, which will be productive through linguistic and cultural adaptation towards an effective engagement. It gives the foundation to produce practical recommendations for those bodies giving religious outreach, teachers, and humanitarian organisations to improve appropriate access to the Mandarin-speaking community of Malaysia.

The results are relevant to the Malaysian Chinese Muslim community and are perhaps not directly generalisable to other instances of communities or people. The findings arise from a few participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions, which may be modified by cognitive dissonance or selectivity.

Future research will include the piloting of the MBDM that could include pre- and post-test assessments of Islamic knowledge acquisition, measures of religious confidence and identity development, user engagement analytics for digital content, and longitudinal indicators of community integration in conjunction with bilingual scholars, Da'wah practitioners, and content producers, followed by evaluative studies regarding its effectiveness and scalability to other smaller Muslim communities in Malaysia.

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**Towards a Mandarin-based da'wah model:
Bridging cultural identity and Islamic communication in Malaysia**

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