

Post-Umrah Meaning-Making among Chinese Indonesian Muslim Converts: An Interpretive Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Religious conversion involves ongoing negotiations of identity, social relationships, religious practice, and life meaning. Although previous studies have examined Chinese Indonesian converts and the spiritual dimensions of Umrah, little is known about how converts retrospectively connect pilgrimage experiences with post-conversion difficulties and everyday life. This study examines how Chinese Indonesian Muslim converts interpreted significant experiences during Umrah and related them to reported changes in life meaning. It used a qualitative descriptive design with an interpretive orientation. Five participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected from January to March 2026 through three synchronous online semi-structured interviews and two written responses based on the same open-ended guide and were then analyzed thematically. Two themes were identified. First, participants interpreted encounters at sacred sites through awe, crying, calmness, surrender, perceived closeness to God, and perceived divine assistance. Second, they connected these experiences with greater acceptance of adversity, religious confidence, continued religious learning, and changes in worship or everyday conduct. These accounts were embedded in earlier family disagreement, social pressure, and identity negotiation, and their depth varied across participants. Umrah therefore appeared as a symbolic and emotional reference point within continuing meaning-making rather than as an independent cause of psychological recovery or uniform long-term transformation. The study contributes an interpretive account of how pilgrimage memories, conversion histories, religious identity, and social relationships intersect in the post-conversion narratives of Chinese Indonesian Muslims.

Keywords: *Chinese Indonesian Converts; Meaning-Making; Religious Conversion; Religious Experience; Umrah*

A. Introduction

Religious conversion involves more than the adoption of a new set of beliefs. For converts, it may also require the renegotiation of personal identity, family relationships, social belonging, and interpretations of past experience. These processes can be particularly complex for Chinese Indonesians who convert to Islam because they may occupy a minority position within both ethnic

Chinese communities and the wider Muslim population. Studies of Chinese Indonesian converts have documented changes in self-understanding, family relations, religious practice, and social adaptation following conversion (Mohammad and Syafiq 2014; Hidayat and Sherina 2020). Conversion should therefore be approached as an extended process of identity and meaning negotiation rather than as a single change in formal religious affiliation.

Religious journeys may become important settings within this continuing process. Umrah combines ritual practice, travel to sacred places, collective worship, and personal reflection. Research on religious travel indicates that Muslims undertake Umrah for interrelated devotional, personal, and experiential reasons rather than for a single religious motivation (Almuhri and Alsawaf 2017). Research on independent Umrah participation also suggests that autonomy and relatedness may shape how pilgrims understand their motivations, although these findings do not necessarily apply to every group of pilgrims (Denianti and Muhajarah 2025). For converts, the journey may acquire additional significance because encounters with the Kaaba, the Prophet's Mosque, and other sacred spaces are interpreted in relation to their conversion histories and subsequent religious lives. Hakim and Muhajarah (2024), for example, examined the spiritual experiences of converts during Umrah and identified accounts of awe, emotional intensity, perceived divine assistance, and surrender to God. Their study described several characteristics of converts' spiritual experiences during the pilgrimage, but it focused primarily on the experiences reported during Umrah itself.

A separate body of research has examined the social and psychological dimensions of religious conversion. Chinese Indonesian converts may encounter family objections, uncertainty in social relationships, and the need to develop new forms of religious knowledge and belonging (Mohammad and Syafiq 2014; Hidayat and Sherina 2020). Religious practices and communities can provide resources for responding to such difficulties, although their meaning and effects vary across personal and social contexts. Research on religious coping indicates that individuals may draw on beliefs, rituals, and perceived relationships with the divine when interpreting stressful experiences (Abu-Raiya and Pargament 2015). From a meaning-making perspective, religious experiences may also become resources through which individuals reconsider difficult events and reorganize the relationship between previous assumptions and present circumstances (Paloutzian and Park 2005; Park 2013). These approaches do not establish that religious practice automatically produces psychological recovery. They instead help explain how individuals may interpret religious experience as relevant to their efforts to understand themselves and their lives.

Transformative Learning Theory provides an additional interpretive lens for examining such accounts. The theory concerns changes in frames of reference

through critical reflection on assumptions, values, and previous experience. Transformative learning may begin when an experience disrupts an established interpretive framework, but transformation does not necessarily occur through a fixed or uniform sequence (Kostara, Gavrielatos, and Loads 2022). In the present study, post-conversion conflict, social pressure, and uncertainty are treated as experiences that may have unsettled participants' previous frames of meaning. Their Umrah narratives are then examined to understand whether and how they connected encounters during the pilgrimage with subsequent reinterpretations of these experiences. The framework is used as a sensitizing analytical perspective rather than as evidence that every participant completed all stages of transformative learning.

Existing studies have consequently addressed three related areas: the social and psychological experiences of Chinese Indonesian converts, the motivations and spiritual dimensions of Umrah, and the role of religion in coping and meaning making. However, less is known about how Chinese Indonesian converts retrospectively connect their experiences during Umrah with the ways they understand post-conversion difficulties and their lives after returning home. Even the closest previous study of converts' Umrah experiences concentrated on the characteristics of spiritual experience during the pilgrimage rather than on reported changes in life meaning after the journey (Hakim and Muhajarah 2024). Examining this relationship can clarify how emotional experience, religious identity, prior social difficulties, and subsequent interpretation are brought together in converts' personal narratives.

This study therefore examines how Chinese Indonesian converts to Islam interpreted significant experiences during Umrah and how they related those experiences to reported changes in the meaning of their lives after returning home. It addresses two questions: How did the participants describe and interpret their religious and emotional experiences during Umrah? How did they connect those experiences with their subsequent understandings of identity, past difficulties, religious commitment, and everyday life? Based on the participants' retrospective accounts, the article proposes that Umrah was narrated as a setting in which emotional release, perceived closeness to God, religious identity, and reinterpretation of earlier post-conversion experiences became interconnected. This proposition concerns the meanings attributed by the participants and does not assume that Umrah independently caused psychological recovery or uniform long-term transformation.

B. Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with an interpretive orientation to examine how Chinese Indonesian converts understood their Umrah experiences and related those experiences to reported changes in life

meaning. This design was selected because the study focused on participants' subjective interpretations rather than measuring the effects of Umrah or establishing a causal relationship between pilgrimage and psychological change (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and subsequent snowball referrals (Nurdiani 2014; Sugiyono 2022). Eligibility criteria required participants to: (1) identify as Chinese Indonesian converts to Islam; (2) have been Muslim for at least one year; (3) have performed Umrah after converting; and (4) be willing to discuss their conversion, pilgrimage, and post-Umrah experiences. Data collection was conducted from January to March 2026 and involved five participants residing in Semarang, Klaten, Bandung, and Sidoarjo. The participants constituted a bounded exploratory sample; the study does not claim thematic saturation or statistical representation.

Table 1.
Participant Characteristics

Code	Age	Residence	Occupation	Conversion Year	Umrah Year	Background
P1	35	Klaten	Homemaker	2017	2025	Christian; converted after independently examining religious sources
P2	76	Semarang	Retired bank employee	1986	2005	Roman Catholic; married a Muslim woman
P3	45	Sidoarjo	Homemaker	2013	2015	Catholic; converted following a period of religious searching and reflection
P4	72	Semarang	Homemaker	1982	2003	Christian/Catholic; became interested in Islam after her husband converted
P5	60	Bandung	Therapist	1994	2022	Christian; converted following a personal search for religious conviction

Source: Authors' research data (2026).

Data were collected remotely using a common semi-structured interview guide. Three participants took part in synchronous online interviews lasting approximately 30–60 minutes. Two participants who were unable to participate synchronously because of location and scheduling constraints provided written responses through Google Forms using the same open-ended questions. Follow-up communication was used when their responses required clarification. The questions addressed participants' conversion backgrounds, meaningful experiences during Umrah, interpretations of religious identity, and reported changes in life orientation after returning. The synchronous interviews were transcribed verbatim, while written responses were retained as textual data. Participants received information about the purpose of the study, participated voluntarily, and could withdraw during the research process. Their identities were protected through the codes P1–P5. The participant excerpts presented in this article were translated from Indonesian into English for publication, with attention to preserving their original meanings.

The data were analyzed thematically through repeated reading, initial coding, category development, theme review, and interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2006). Codes were developed around conversion experiences, interpretations of Umrah, religious identity, social relations, and post-Umrah life orientation. Related codes were grouped into categories and then into themes representing recurrent patterns across the accounts. Interpretive summaries were returned to participants for member checking, and peer debriefing with the academic supervisor was used to examine the consistency of the interpretations. The use of both synchronous interviews and written responses produced differences in narrative detail because written responses offered fewer opportunities to observe nonverbal expression or pursue spontaneous elaboration (Rachmawati 2007). In addition, the interval between Umrah and data collection varied considerably – from approximately one year to more than twenty years – which may have influenced recall. The study therefore offers retrospective accounts of how five participants interpreted their experiences; it does not establish that Umrah caused the reported changes or that those changes remained stable over time.

C. Results and Discussion

The five participants differed in age, conversion history, social circumstances, and the length of time that had elapsed since their Umrah pilgrimage. Their accounts nevertheless formed two related themes: (1) interpretations of Umrah as an emotional and religious experience and (2) reported changes in life meaning after Umrah. The first theme concerns experiences during the pilgrimage, whereas the second concerns how

participants connected those experiences with conversion-related difficulties and subsequent daily life.

1. Results

1) Interpreting Umrah as an Emotional and Religious Experience

Participants described emotionally intense moments at the Rawdah, the Kaaba, the Prophet's Mosque, and the Black Stone. They spoke of crying, awe, calmness, gratitude, and longing. These reactions were not equally elaborate in every account, but all five participants associated Umrah with a heightened awareness of their relationship with God.

P1 recalled:

"When I entered the Rawdah, the way was made easy even though it was crowded. Allah gave me enough time to pray there, while the people beside me had already been asked to leave by the guards."

P2 related the perceived ease of the pilgrimage to prayer:

"Before doing anything, I would pray two rak'ahs and ask that everything be made easy. Praise be to God, everything was made easy for me."

For P3, leaving Medina produced an intense feeling of spiritual longing:

"When I was leaving Medina for Mecca and the Grand Mosque, I cried intensely. I realized, 'So this is what longing feels like.'"

P4 described her response to seeing the Kaaba:

"When I reached the Kaaba, I was amazed. I kept getting chills just from seeing it."

P5 expressed the experience more briefly:

"I felt happy and moved, and I came to love the Prophet more deeply."

These accounts indicate that participants understood sacred places and pilgrimage rituals through emotional and devotional language. The data do not show that every participant experienced the same emotional process. Rather, they show a shared tendency to interpret particular moments as signs of closeness to God, even though the intensity and detail of the accounts varied.

Participants also associated Umrah with greater confidence in their Muslim identity. P4 summarized this change by stating, "I became more certain in my Islam." For participants who had previously encountered uncertainty or resistance after conversion, this sense of certainty formed part of their interpretation of the pilgrimage.

Perceived divine assistance was another recurrent element. P1 described crying while praying in the Rawdah because of an awareness of past sins:

"While praying, I could not stop crying because I felt that I had committed many sins. In the Rawdah, I felt very close to Allah. My heart felt calm and peaceful."

P2 understood the opportunity to touch and kiss the Black Stone as divine facilitation: "Allah made it possible for me to kiss the Black Stone. Praise be to God, I could do it immediately." P3 similarly connected her movement through the sacred sites with trust in God:

"I often went by myself because I was curious and wanted to see the Prophet's Mosque and the Grand Mosque. By Allah's grace, I did not get lost. I said, 'This is Allah's house. I could not possibly be lost in His house.'"

These statements represent participants' religious interpretations of events. They show how feelings of safety, ease, and access to sacred places were incorporated into their accounts of surrender and divine assistance; they should not be read as independently verifiable evidence of supernatural intervention.

2) Reported Changes in Life Meaning after Umrah

Participants' interpretations of post-Umrah change were embedded in experiences that began before the pilgrimage. Their conversion histories included secrecy, family disagreement, workplace conflict, uncertainty about belonging, and concern about the social consequences of becoming Muslim. These earlier experiences formed the background against which they later interpreted Umrah.

P1 initially concealed her religious practices: "At first, it was difficult because I had to pray secretly and learn how to pray and read the Qur'an by myself." P2 described mistreatment by Muslim acquaintances and conflict at work, including a legal case in which he was eventually acquitted. He interpreted these events as tests accompanying his conversion. P3 reported that a sibling who held a leadership role in a church spoke negatively about Islam. Because she felt that she lacked sufficient religious knowledge to respond verbally, she attempted to represent Islam through her conduct. P4 briefly described her family's reaction as disapproving, while P5 recalled her mother's fear that conversion to Islam would bring social and economic hardship.

For P3, conversion was preceded by marital conflict and disappointment with the response she received from a religious leader:

"I had problems with my first husband and wanted to separate. I asked a pastor about it, but I was disappointed with the answer. I wondered how a religion could fail to protect its followers when they faced a problem. I recited the shahada in secret. My family did not know, and I still went to church while learning about Islam by myself."

This account indicates that reflection on life meaning did not begin with Umrah. It had already developed through marital conflict, religious questioning, conversion, and the negotiation of family relationships. In P3's account, Umrah became part of an ongoing process of interpretation rather than the sole origin of change.

After Umrah, participants reported greater acceptance, religious commitment, and clarity in approaching difficulties. P1 stated:

“After Umrah, I felt that I could live more simply, accept things more sincerely, and place greater trust in divine decree.”

P2 similarly said:

“After returning, I became more able to accept life’s trials. They used to feel very heavy, but now I understand them as part of the tests given by Allah.”

P3 associated her post-Umrah experience with a stronger awareness of divine mercy: “The clearest change was that I felt Allah’s qualities of *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim* much more deeply after returning from Umrah.” She also recalled that Christian relatives and community members contributed money and practical assistance for her passport and pilgrimage preparations. She interpreted this support not only as interpersonal assistance but also as an expression of divine care.

P4 reported greater certainty in Islam and a stronger concern with ending life in a state of faith. P5 described becoming “closer and more obedient to Allah.” Although these shorter statements point in the same general direction, they provide less detail than the accounts of P1–P3 and therefore do not support equally extensive interpretations.

Participants also connected post-Umrah meaning with everyday conduct. P1 reported that she tried not to remain distressed for too long when facing misfortune or become excessive when experiencing happiness. She also became more careful about her speech and inner attitudes. P3 described a continuing desire to study Islam and strengthen her faith. P4 reported attempting to perform the five daily prayers on time and adding voluntary prayers when possible. P5 described increased obedience in general terms. P2’s narrative emphasized continued commitment to Islam despite workplace difficulties, although his account did not establish whether this commitment emerged specifically after Umrah.

The pattern across the accounts was therefore not a uniform or complete transformation. Participants retrospectively associated Umrah with emotional calm, stronger religious confidence, greater acceptance of adversity, or increased commitment to religious practice. At the same time, these interpretations were inseparable from conversion histories, family relations, and social support. The findings consequently identify perceived changes and meaning-making processes rather than a standardized post-Umrah outcome.

2. Discussion

The findings show that the five participants interpreted Umrah as part of a longer biographical process shaped by conversion experiences and ongoing

social relations. Emotional responses at sacred sites were linked to later reflections on acceptance, religious confidence, and daily practice. Rather than functioning as an isolated turning point, Umrah was integrated into participants' evolving narratives of faith and identity.

The social pressures described by participants align with research that views conversion as a multidimensional process involving changes in relationships, cultural positioning, and self-understanding (Rambo 1993). Studies on Chinese Indonesian converts similarly highlight family tensions and identity reconstruction after conversion (Mohammad and Syafiq 2014; Hidayat and Sherina 2020). The present findings extend this literature by showing how pilgrimage experiences are retrospectively incorporated into post-conversion meaning-making. However, identity change is not linear; it remains context-dependent and continuously negotiated across social settings (Peek 2005; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010). Broader research on spiritual conversion likewise treats religious identity change as a variable process shaped by personal and social contexts rather than as a uniform outcome (Zinnbauer and Pargament 1998).

Participants' descriptions of awe, crying, calmness, and surrender resemble core features of religious experience such as ineffability and passivity (Zakiy 2023). Similar patterns have been reported in a previous study of Umrah experiences among converts (Hakim and Muhajarah 2024). Whereas that study focused on the characteristics of spiritual experience during pilgrimage, the present study examines how participants retrospectively connected such experiences with post-Umrah meaning-making and everyday religious life.

Emotion formed part of the meaning-reconstruction processes described in the participants' accounts rather than appearing only as a secondary response. This is consistent with Dirkx's (2001) view of emotion in adult learning and with research showing that pilgrimage may combine devotion, reflection, and spiritual seeking (Almuhrzi and Alsawaf 2017). However, emotional intensity alone cannot be interpreted as evidence of lasting psychological change.

The participants' reliance on prayer, surrender, and divine trust reflects forms of religious coping. While religious coping can provide meaning and hope, its effects are not uniformly positive (Abu-Raiya and Pargament 2015). Positive and negative forms of coping may coexist depending on context (Pargament et al. 1998; Ahmad, Muslimah, and Agustina 2025). In this study, participants mainly reported acceptance and perceived support from God, but the data do not allow assessment of possible religious struggle. Therefore, Umrah is better understood as a perceived coping resource rather than a therapeutic intervention.

The reinterpretation of adversity described by participants aligns with meaning-making theories. Frankl (2006), Park (2013), and Paloutzian and Park (2005) emphasize how individuals revise interpretations of suffering within

broader belief systems. In this study, adversity was reframed as a test and associated with greater acceptance of divine will. However, the data do not show that distress was fully resolved or that reinterpretations were consistently adaptive across all life domains.

Transformative learning offers a partial framework for understanding these changes. Some elements of Mezirow's (2000) model – such as reflection on prior beliefs and reported changes in practice – are evident in the accounts. Later developments in transformative learning also recognize the roles of emotion and spirituality (Kostara, Gavrielatos, and Loads 2022). However, empirical reviews have found substantial variation in how transformative change is defined and demonstrated (Taylor 2007), while Newman (2012) cautions against treating every personally meaningful or desirable form of learning as transformative. The present study did not track participants over time or observe their pre- and post-Umrah conditions. It therefore cannot confirm a complete transformative sequence, particularly given the small sample and the long intervals between Umrah and data collection for some participants.

Post-pilgrimage change is also shaped by the everyday constraints encountered after returning home. Al-Ajarma (2021) shows that pilgrims may struggle to sustain idealized religious intentions in daily life. Research on Hajj similarly indicates that moral and behavioral change is negotiated rather than automatic and may be influenced by social expectations surrounding the status of returned pilgrims (Hamid 2025; Sonia and Hilmi 2025; Putri and Hasanah 2026). Although Hajj and Umrah differ in their ritual status and social meanings, these studies provide a useful comparison by showing that post-pilgrimage change is an ongoing and socially situated process rather than a fixed outcome.

Social relations appeared particularly significant in shaping how pilgrimage was experienced and remembered, especially in one participant's account. While quantitative studies suggest links between social support and well-being among converts (Taufik et al. 2025), the present data do not support generalization across all participants. Social support is therefore better understood as a contextual factor influencing interpretation rather than a consistent driver of change.

The study therefore contributes a small-scale interpretive account of how Chinese Indonesian converts connect Umrah with post-conversion meaning-making. Its contribution lies in showing how emotional experience, religious interpretation, conversion history, and social context are combined in retrospective narratives. This contribution remains bounded by the small sample, unequal depth of participants' accounts, mixed data-collection modes, and substantial variation in the intervals between Umrah and data collection. These constraints limit causal interpretation and transferability beyond the five participants.

D. Conclusion

The five Chinese Indonesian converts interpreted Umrah as a meaningful religious experience embedded within broader processes of conversion and social adjustment. They described emotions of awe, surrender, and closeness to God, and linked these experiences to increased acceptance, religious commitment, and reflection on adversity. However, these changes were not uniform, and the data do not indicate that Umrah alone produced lasting psychological transformation.

Instead, Umrah functioned as a symbolic and emotional reference point within ongoing processes of identity reconstruction. The findings show how pilgrimage experiences were integrated into participants' evolving narratives of faith rather than narrated as definitive turning points. The study contributes to understanding post-Umrah meaning-making among converts, but its findings are limited by its small sample, retrospective design, mixed data-collection modes, and unequal depth of participants' accounts. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and more diverse samples to better understand how pilgrimage-related meanings develop and change over time.

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