

## The legal and cultural status of Chinese temples in contemporary Java

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Since the collapse of Soeharto's New Order in 1998, Indonesia has been experiencing broad political and social changes. While the Soeharto regime was generally cautious and oppressive toward anything related to China or the ethnic Chinese, the subsequent administrations faced the pressure to make sweeping changes to existing discriminatory policies and laws, and have put these changes into action, though gradually. With this major change in the social environment, an atmosphere is being engendered across the nation, producing a feeling that anyone is free to enjoy 'Chinese culture' which for a long time was banned from being expressed in public. This spirit is palpable for example during Chinese New Year, when red lanterns and other ornate decorations, and characters such as Gong Xi Fa Cai (恭喜發財) are seen dancing about everywhere. Along with upscale malls and hotels, it is Chinese temples (*klenteng*) that have become the centers of these festivities. Having been the anchorage of traditional worship for the ethnic Chinese, during the Soeharto era these facilities were the target of unfavorable treatment. In the last few years, their activities have gradually been revitalized. This article scrutinizes the changed legal and cultural status of the Chinese temples engendering changes within the Chinese community at large, by focusing on developments in post-'New Order' Java.

**Keywords:** Chinese temples; ethnic Chinese; post-'New Order'; religion; Java

### Introduction

Past studies have investigated the status of the so-called 'Chinese Religions (*Agama Tionghoa*)' such as Buddhism and Confucianism in the Indonesian state.<sup>1</sup> However, research has been limited on how these general religious trends or developments of individual religious organizations have actually manifested in local ethnic Chinese communities, what sort of issues are being generated as a result, and what sort of changes have been effected in the religious practices of the people.<sup>2</sup> Also, I have yet to come across a study which sheds light on what sort of status Chinese temples have had during the various political phases of the Indonesian state; and on how temples have fared since the 'Chinese cultural renaissance' following the fall of the Soeharto regime. Under Soeharto, an instruction issued by the Minister of Home Affairs (*Inmendagri No. 455.2-360/1988*) had imposed strict regulations on Chinese temples

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<sup>1</sup>Brown, 'Contemporary Indonesian Buddhism and Monotheism'; Coppel, 'Is Confucianism a Religion?'; Coppel, *Studying Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia*; Rees, 'The Sam Kaw Hwee and Christian Conversion'; Suryadinata, 'State and Minority Religions'.

<sup>2</sup>Tsuda, '*Kajinsei*' no *Minzokushi*, 61–107.

(*klenteng*). It stipulated that ‘alien cultural systems (*tata budaya asing*)’, such as the Chinese, had to be rejected as being unsuitable for ‘Indonesia’s identity (*kepribadian Indonesia*)’, and that any new construction of *klenteng*, expansions of its buildings, or renovation beyond basic maintenance would therefore be forbidden. This instruction also forbade *klenteng* to recast themselves as Buddhist by taking on the designation of ‘*vihara*’, a term which originally referred to ‘a Buddhist facility not based on Chinese traditional belief’, as part of its name. The instruction only finally lost its legal basis when the Presidential Decision No.6/2000 was promulgated.

It was with a research interest in the changed legal and cultural status of *klenteng*, that the author executed a field trip with a team of researchers, spending three weeks visiting the Chinese temples located in towns across East Java Province and the northern coast of Central Java Province, where it is known that a large number of ethnic Chinese settled from a relatively early period in history.

### Enshrined deities

As we know, a temple is a facility for worship built around an altar where a specific deity is enshrined. In most Chinese temples, on the left and right sides of the main altar, additional altars are positioned for different deities, and in some huge temples, even additional buildings are provided next to the main building.

Some of the deities have a deep connection with a specific area within China. For example, *Guang Ze Zun Wang* (廣澤尊王) is considered to have a profound relationship with Sanyi area (三邑) of Quanzhou (泉州), and *Qing Yuan Zhen Jun* (清元真君), enshrined next to the main deity at *Tak Hay Kiong* (澤海宮) in Tegal, who is the protector of those who are originally from Changtai County (長泰) of Zhangzhou (漳州). The presence of these deities may also shed light on a historical process of immigration from a specific area in China. It is important to note is that the relationship between the area in China a person is originally from and the worship of a specific deity has at this point almost completely lost significance, now that people are worshipping any deity they believe will be responsive to their prayer with relative freedom.

In every temple, we can observe an incense pot for honoring *Tian Gong* (天公), positioned near the central entrance of the main building, facing outward. *Tian Gong* is sometimes viewed to be the same deity as *Yu Huang Shang Di* (玉皇上帝), the supreme god in folk Daoism. However, in the context of modern Indonesia where there is an absolute demand to believe in the ‘One and Only God (*Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*)’, many people seem to perceive *Tian Gong* simply as an abstract monotheistic being, and in that sense it can be categorized as one of the deities largely defined by the context of their locales.

In the Chinese temples of Java, some of the deities enshrined are more apparently local ones, meaning that their roots cannot be traced back to mainland China. Besides Mbah Djuggo at Mt. Kawi who embodies the mixing and fusing of Javanese and Chinese cultures and rituals, three other deities are worthy of mention: *Ze Hay Zhen Ren* (澤海真人) in the western region of the northern coast of Java; *Chen Fu Zhen Ren* (陳府真人, *Kongco Banyuwangi*), enshrined in the area spanning the eastern end of Java and Bali; and *Chen Huang Er Xian Sheng* (陳黃式先生/ 義勇公), enshrined in Lasem and neighboring towns. On beliefs unique to the ethnic Chinese in Java including the above-mentioned deities, Salmon provides an excellent

introduction;<sup>3</sup> thus I will not enter further into this subject. Further down below, though, I will revisit the topic of *Chen Fu Zhen Ren* with regards to relationship-building activities between Chinese temples that have in common the worship of this deity, which in recent years have been on the rise.

### Issues concerning the status of the Chinese temples

Though seemingly traditional, Chinese temples have not simply preserved a 'traditional' existence through the passage of time. Each of these temples have subsisted while undergoing a unique development in the social and political contexts of the respective regions they were placed in, coping with a governing system that at times would weigh on them from above. Examining both the religious positioning and legal positioning of Chinese temples in Java, I will first elucidate the broad framework by which these temples have been governed.

#### *The religious positioning of Chinese temples*

When Soeharto's New Order was established following the chaos of *G30S* – officially claimed to be an abortive coup by the Communist Party of Indonesia, backed by Communist China – adherence to *Pancasila*, whose first pillar stipulates the belief in the 'One and Only God', became a matter of absolute importance in order to thoroughly suppress any comeback of 'communists-atheists'. It was in this climate that a demand started to be placed on all citizens, to believe in one of the religions approved by the state – Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hindu, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Confucianism in Indonesia had been schematized with a doctrine akin to Islam-Christian model since the early twentieth century,<sup>4</sup> and in 1967 the Confucius Supreme Council of Indonesia (*Majelis Tinggi Agama Konghucu Indonesia*, abbreviated as MATAKIN) was formed as its sole representative organization.<sup>5</sup> As the Soeharto regime entered into a period of stabilization in the 1980s, religious institutions would also undergo intensified governmental intervention and control, while the status of Confucianism as well as the status of *klenteng*, in fact everything related to '*Cina*', grew ever more precarious.

Aiming at cutting off the ethnic Chinese residents of Indonesia from the Chinese mainland, and preventing a flare-up of anti-ethnic Chinese sentiment of the *pribumi* residents, i.e. the indigenous Indonesians (see Thung Ju Lan in this issue), Soeharto's New Order tried to assimilate the ethnic Chinese completely into Indonesian society, and to erase any 'Chineseness' outwardly noticeable. As part of this 'Assimilation Policy', in 1967 the Presidential Instruction on the Religion, Belief, and Customs of *Cina* No.14/1967 was issued, and any elements deemed as being of 'Chinese origin' was banned from being exhibited in public. In 1979, Confucianism, a religion clearly 'smacking of *Cina* (*berbau Cina*)', was abruptly decreed as being a religion not officially recognized.<sup>6</sup>

Having long been tossed about between these two major policies, Chinese temples scattered across Indonesia have been on a search for a way to gain a status

<sup>3</sup>Salmon, 'Cults Peculiar to the Chinese of Java', 279–305.

<sup>4</sup>Coppel, 'Is Confucianism a Religion?', 125–35; Coppel, *Studying Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia*.

<sup>5</sup>Suryadinata, 'State and Minority Religions', 6–9.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

that might bring them stability.<sup>7</sup> The form this search for status has taken in reality has been different for each temple, according to their individual circumstances. Some have tried to seek protection from Indonesian Buddhist associations. Others have just tried to keep a low profile.

### *Chinese temples in East Java*

The confused and chaotic state of society that pervaded following *G30S* was palpable in East Java as well. Amidst this atmosphere, stakeholders of the local Chinese temples held discussions on what steps to take in order to avoid their temples being perceived as merely a ‘facility for the ethnic Chinese’ rather than a ‘religious facility’ and being forced into resultant closure. Then in 1967 the temples’ association in East Java was formed. This association succeeded in gaining the endorsement of the local military authority, and in December of the following year, receiving the backing of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, was expanded into a national organization (*Perhimpunan Tempat Ibadat Tri Dharma se-Indonesia*/ 全印尼三教廟宇聯合會, hereafter referred to as PTITD), headquartered in Surabaya.

The label ‘*Tri Dharma*’ actually means ‘Three Teachings (三教)’, and expresses a religious notion that the traditional belief systems of the ethnic Chinese, consisting of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, should be understood as a single unit. Much earlier in 1930s Jakarta (then Batavia), a movement aiming to schematize these three teachings into a modernized religion capable of serving as a spiritual pillar for the ethnic Chinese had taken place, with the establishment of an organization named *Sam Kauw Hwee* (三教會), spearheaded by Kwee Tek Hoay (郭德懷; 1886–1952).<sup>8</sup> While the Indonesia Tridharma Association (*Gabungan Tridharma Indonesia*, abbreviated here as GTI), the successor of *Sam Kauw Hwee*, had been almost consistently active in western Java, a new separate association based in Surabaya was born driven by the mission to gain approval of Chinese temples as a ‘religious facility’ amidst efforts to cope with the chaos following *G30S*.

Most Chinese temples in East Java joined PTITD, and gained the status as ‘Tri Dharma Worship Sanctuaries (TITD)’. Apparently for some temples it was a negative reason that prompted them to join PTITD: temples in the town of Tuban, for example, didn’t begin to call themselves TITD until the mid-1970s when it became clear that ‘staying as we were (without becoming affiliates of an officially recognized religion), we were at risk of being closed down’.<sup>9</sup> In any event, according to a list obtained from PTITD in 2009, the number of temples in East Java having membership with them has reached 39.

PTITD has always defined itself as a Buddhist organization for official purposes. However the doctrine of this organization is to follow Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism as an integral whole, and for that reason most Chinese temples with PTITD membership added a specially installed altar for the Three Saints (三教聖人/ *Tri Nabi*) – consisting of *Sakyamuni* (釈迦牟尼), Confucius (至聖先師), and *Lao-tze* (太上老君).

<sup>7</sup>Tsuda, ‘*Kajinsei no minzokushi*’, 65–72.

<sup>8</sup>Rees, ‘The Sam Kauw Hwee and Christian Conversion’; Duara, ‘Religion and Citizenship in China and the Diaspora’, 54–63.

<sup>9</sup>Interview with Ie Khing Hien/Nur Iskandar (余慶興), the deputy secretary of the temple management organization in Tuban, on 2 February 2009.

In 1977, the two separate organizations for priests, belonging to GTI based in Jakarta, and to PTITD headquartered in Surabaya, joined in a common federation. Two years later they were completely integrated as one organization (*Majelis Rohaniwan Tridharma Seluruh Indonesia*, abbreviated as *Martrisia*), subsequently becoming a formal member of WALUBI (*Perwalian Umat Buddha Indonesia*), the only unified Buddhist association in Indonesia. In 1997, the Jakarta and West Java branches of *Martrisia* split apart and returned to being separate organizations, and the following year the two branches joined to form a new independent organization (*Majelis Agama Buddha Tridharma Indonesia*).

### *Chinese temples of Central Java*

Contrasting East Java where many Chinese temples flocked to PTITD to obtain status as a TITD, in Central Java where the presence of PTITD was not strong, statuses of Chinese temples are varied. When surveying these temples, two broad categories emerge: temples calling themselves TITDs, and ones that prefix their formal or alternative name with *vihara*, a label indicating a 'pure' Buddhist facility. There are some temples in Central Java that have a unique status. Cases in point are the *Tjoe Hwie Kiong* (慈惠宮) and the *Hok Tek Bio* (福德廟) in Rembang.<sup>10</sup> Both these temples had, in the late 1970s, secured a stable status as '*vihara*' under the umbrella of Mahayana Buddhism, when they had added statues of *Sakyamuni* and other Buddhist saints. However, to address the subsequent emergence of various undesirable effects of what apparently was perceived as an excessive emphasis on Buddhism-ness, such as the estrangement of ethnic Chinese who had converted to Catholicism, a general meeting was convened in 1995 in which a charter was adopted, stating that 'a *klenteng* is a *klenteng*; it is a facility for the traditional beliefs of ethnic Chinese, not a religious facility dedicated to a specific religion'.

### *The legal positioning of Chinese temples*

Another challenge for the Chinese temples has been whether they should maintain their qualification as *yayasan*, or not. *Yayasan* is a legal status similar to that of a foundation, assumed by nonprofit organizations performing social, religious or humanitarian activities. However, a law defining exactly what *yayasan* is has never existed. In the mid-1980s, when Soeharto had reached the peak of his power, a number of laws regulating social organizations (*organisasi kemasyarakatan*) were issued in rapid succession, and a basic groundwork for legislation was laid. However, the true objective of these laws were to make it mandatory for all social organizations to affirm the state philosophy *Pancasila* as their 'the Sole Principle (*asas tunggal*)' and to register with the courts and the Ministry of Home Affairs so that their activities be easily monitored. Under this condition, many temple management organizations took steps to obtain the status legal persons by establishing a basic charter and then registering as *yayasan*.

In the post-Soeharto era, as a part of policies to strengthen 'the rule of law (*kepastian hukum*)', a wide range of amendments and improvements of laws gradually began to take place, and one such development was the promulgation of laws that provided a detailed definition of *yayasan*: Law No.16/2001 and its

<sup>10</sup>See also Tsuda, '*Kajinsei*' no *Minzokushi*, 61–107.

amended version Law No.28/2004. The enactment of these two laws had a significant impact on Chinese temples. Article 1 and 2 of Law No.16/2001 provide that a *yayasan* is an entity established by a founder (*pembina*) for a specific purpose. Establishing a *yayasan* entails providing a certain amount of property that is controlled by an official manager appointed by the founder (who retains indefinitely his or her authority as the highest decision-maker). The appointment term of the manager minimally last for a term of five years. He or she is monitored by a supervisor who will stay in office for a maximum of five years. There are to be no further members of staff other than those assigned to these roles. It is furthermore not allowed to have any procedure or body ensuring democratic decision-making such as a general meeting of members.<sup>11</sup>

A Chinese temple, on the other hand, is generally maintained and managed by ethnic Chinese residents of the local community working together with a cooperative spirit. According to Article 71 of Law No. 28/2004, any *yayasan* founded before the enactment of this law should revise its charter within one year; if an organization was already registered in court or listed in the gazette as a *yayasan*, the revision of the charter had to be completed within three years. The assessment as to whether the form of *yayasan* defined in the new laws is congruent with this probable vision of what a Chinese temple should be, appears to vary according to the individual temple.

At *Liong Tjwan Bio* (龍泉廟) in Probolinggo, for example, they had chosen to become a *yayasan* in the early 1970s ‘to respond to the needs of the times of that period in Indonesia’, the enactment of the new laws prompted the decision, in 2009, of returning to be just a ‘worship sanctuary, the true form we started out as’.<sup>12</sup> An organization overseeing two temples in the town of Tuban explained that they organized themselves as a *yayasan* during the Soeharto era because ‘there was a risk that we would be without legal protection if we did not become a *yayasan*’. Yet, when the aforementioned new laws were enacted they too went back to being an ‘ordinary organization’.<sup>13</sup> Other temples, though, have decided to conform to the new model of *yayasan*.

### Relationships among Chinese temples

With the liberalization of Chinese culture, the traditional activities of Chinese temples are now being vitalized. Annual festivals at Chinese temples are gradually becoming more spectacular and larger in scale. These festivals are generally organized according to the lunar calendar, and include Chinese New Year, *Cap Go Meh*, as well as the birthdays of the main deities. The celebrations come in many different forms, varying according to the temple and the occasion. Some involve the preparation of offerings by local members of the temple and simply coming together to worship, while others feature lively performances of band music and *Potehi* puppets. On some occasions, the statue of a deity will be carried on a sacred palanquin in a procession around town, accompanied by the dragon and lion dance. For large-scale festivals featuring processions, temples in the surrounding towns are often invited, and dozens of palanquins may be carried around town.

<sup>11</sup>Djasmin, *Badan Hukum Alternatif Pengganti Yayasan Lama*.

<sup>12</sup>Interview with Listyo Sentoso (李子昇), Director of *Liong Tjwan Bio*, on 28 January 2009.

<sup>13</sup>Interview with Ie Khing Hien on 2 February 2009.



Since the fall of Soeharto, the trend of temples dispatching their teams to neighboring towns to support each other's festivals has increased markedly. During Soeharto's rule, it was extremely difficult for temples to organize festivals on a large scale, and relationship building through mutual visits stayed limited to the dispatching of board members. However, when the repression of 'Chinese-ness' ceased, temples with the ability to mobilize enough capital and people began to send invitations to nearby temples, calling together palanquins and dragon and lion dance troupes to organize festivals on a large scale.

Another pattern of relationship building, somewhat unusual but noteworthy, concerns relationships formed through the deity *Chen Fu Zhen Ren*. In Java, *Chen Fu Zhen Ren* is enshrined at four temples as a main deity. Bali is another area where traditions involving this deity have a vital presence, and the statue is enshrined there at several sites, as well as at one site on Lombok Island.<sup>14</sup> As far as is known today, there had never been any interaction between these temples. In 2000, however, board members of *Hoo Tong Bio* (護唐廟) in Banyuwangi were the ones most vocally calling for the formation of an association (*Paguyuban Tan Hu Cin Jin*) of all the temples, in which this deity was enshrined. A total of nine temples, consisting of four temples in East Java, four in Bali, and one in Lombok joined this initiative, and have since come together every six months.<sup>15</sup>

### Confucianism vs. Daoism

As described earlier, Confucianism had already had the status as one of the officially recognized religions, when in 1979 its official recognition was voided. Its nationwide organization MATAKIN, however, was not dissolved. Around 2006, spurred by the reclassification of Confucianism to an officially recognized status, regular Confucian worship services, and worship classes for children were infused with a new energy. These activities are often carried out purely as one component of the entire religious milieu of the respective temple, though.

Daoism, too, has made its appearance on the post-Suharto scene. A situation of particular interest is the *Tak Hay Kiong* in Tegal. The temple has a long-standing status as a TITD. It used to host three statues representing the three saints, *Lao-tze*, Confucius and *Sakyamuni*. The statue of Confucius used, in fact, to be enshrined in a special sanctuary located on the premises of *Tak Hay Kiong* that was taken care of by MAKIN (*Majelis Agama Konghucu*) Tegal, i.e. the Tegal branch of the Council for Confucian Religion. When Confucianism gained official recognition in 2006, MAKIN Tegal spun off completely from the temple organization 'for the sake of future growth' and rented a property diagonally facing *Tak Hay Kiong*, to which the statue of Confucius was transferred.<sup>16</sup> At *Tak Hay Kiong*, on the other hand, there occurred a complete change of ritual in 2000. The religious regime change was initiated by a local Chinese, born in 1971, who had encountered Daoism for the first time in a book imported from Beijing, and who was subsequently motivated to take up Daoist studies in Singapore.<sup>17</sup> Since his return in 2000, *Tak Hay Kiong* has

<sup>14</sup>Salmon and Sidhata, 'From Skipper to Deified Ancestor'.

<sup>15</sup>Interview with Indrana Tjahjono (余满瑞), the board director of *Hoo Tong Bio*, on 4 September 2009.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Lie Ing Liang (李英良), Chairman of MAKIN Tegal, on 8 February 2009.

<sup>17</sup>Interview with Tan Min San (陳敏善), Director of Rituals at *Tak Hay Kiong*, on 8 February 2009.

become a temple upholding Daoism as its main belief, an extremely rare occurrence in Java.

As this case reveals, the recent spread of a rebranded, 'pure' Confucianism headed by MATAKIN has generated new tensions not only in TITD temples but also among the ethnic Chinese community at large who has inherited the teachings of Confucius as a non-denominational customary practice. And there is a possibility that these tensions may lead to the surfacing of mutual differentiation and opposition to a point that different notions of Confucianism can no longer be accommodated in the same sacred space.

### ***Klenteng* as hubs of the ethnic Chinese community**

In the past, Chinese temples were not only facilities for worship, but also functioned as hubs of the ethnic Chinese communities. In Rembang, for instance, the two local temples had rented out dishes and other items for free on the occasion of weddings and other family events.<sup>18</sup> In several towns, mutual funeral aid organizations had been included in the temple management organization. Under the 'Assimilation Policy' under Soeharto, Chinese temples had simply struggled to maintain their existence, which had stalled many activities, functions, and services. Today, however, there are indications that temples have been also expanding the scope of their 'cultural' activities again. *Eng An Kiong* (永安宮) in Malang, for example, bought a 50-hectare plot of land in the suburbs of the city, where it opened a cemetery dedicated to all ethnic Chinese – regardless of their religious affiliation – in 2008.

At many temples, Mandarin classes can be taken by anyone who wishes to do so. At *Liong Tjwan Bio* in Probolinggo, for instance, three- to eight-year-olds have gathered for classes every Sunday morning since 2009, where they are taught Mandarin along with manners of worship, singing, and good manners. The temple, moreover, has awarded scholarships to two local ethnic Chinese youth to study for four years in Xiamen. The hope and expectation of the temple community is that they will teach Mandarin to the local ethnic Chinese community upon their return.<sup>19</sup>

Another case is *Pao An Thian* (寶安殿), located in Pekalongan, where a young teacher who studied abroad in China has been teaching Mandarin to approximately 60 children every Sunday for free since 2003. The temple management organization has furthermore just recently purchased an unoccupied house across the street with the goal to build a school or hospital there.<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion**

From what I have put forward above, it can be concluded that since the fall of Soeharto, and particularly since the liberalization of Chinese traditions in 2006, members of the ethnic Chinese community in Indonesia have generally been exposed to the new situation of having to make choices proactively, as they are no longer

<sup>18</sup>Tsuda, '*Kajinsei*' no *Minzokushi*, 77.

<sup>19</sup>Interview with Listyo Sentoso on 28 January 2009. See also Tsuda, 'Chinese Indonesians who Study Mandarin'.

<sup>20</sup>Interview with Gan Tek Tjiang on 7 February 2009.



dictated by the former legally stipulated confinements. This also holds true for temple organizations whose recent decisions have engendered a redefinition of their whole organization and *raison d'être*.

With the tendency of contemporary *klenteng* to want to become non-denominational hubs for the local ethnic Chinese in towns and cities, new tensions have arisen among the Chinese community at large. Above, I have already drawn attention to incidents of separation between Daoist and Confucianist followers. Even more delicate is the issue of how to engage those ethnic Chinese who converted to Catholicism and Protestantism, as they now account for nearly half of the ethnic Chinese population. As long as a Chinese temple is, even if nominally, positioned as the facility of a particular religious group, it leaves open a possibility for conflict between ethnic and religious affiliation.

What bears upon further developments as regards this issue is the extent to which ethnic Chinese from countries such as China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore will be involved in (re)building a relationship based on 'same race and same script' with Indonesia's ethnic Chinese, and whether international connections are being formed through specific denominations.<sup>21</sup>

### Notes on contributor

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<sup>21</sup>Ong, 'Recent Developments'.

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