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## Chinese New Year Celebrations: A Reproduction of Muslim Chinese Culture in Palembang

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### Abstract

*Chinese New Year celebrations, traditionally a Chinese cultural festival rich in heritage and ritual, have been carried out with flamboyance in Chinese Muslim communities as a form of cultural reproduction. This article explores the unique phenomenon of the reproduction of Chinese Muslim culture through Chinese New Year celebrations. In this context, cultural adaptation and acculturation occurs between Islamic values and elements of Chinese culture. This article notes how Chinese New Year celebrations became a platform through which Chinese Muslim identity was maintained and developed, maintaining their cultural roots while celebrating religious diversity. Through anthropological-historical studies in qualitative research by conducting interviews and in-depth observations, the author explores the special ways in which this community organizes Chinese New Year celebrations that combine Islamic nuances with Chinese nuances, creating a unique and distinctive narrative. By analyzing the religious practices and typical rituals that occur during Chinese New Year celebrations, this article provides an in-depth understanding of how this celebration becomes a symbol of cultural reproduction that is lively, dynamic, and in harmony with religious values. Ultimately, this article highlights the implications of this phenomenon for the sustainability of Chinese Muslim culture, as well as contributing to global understanding of the dynamics of cultural reproduction in increasingly diverse societies.*

**Keywords:** Chinese New Year, Culture Reproduction, Muslim Chinese

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### INTRODUCTION

Studies on the Chinese community in Indonesia are still interesting to discuss. This is due to the long history of the Chinese Indonesian people. Before being accepted as part of

an ethnic group, they had become an unwanted part of the Indonesian racial and cultural order (Dawis, 2013). History records that the riots that occurred in May 1998 were also called anti-Chinese riots which caused a lot of damage due to looting, robbery and sentiments against ethnic Chinese (Hutahaean, 2014). Apart from that, the riots that occurred were a negative excess of demands for democracy and the overthrow of the authoritarianism of the Suharto government (Suparno, 2012). At that time, anti-Chinese sentiment combined with people's anger at the government led to acts of violence against the Chinese community in big cities in Indonesia (Anggraeni, 2010). The 1998 riots caused most Chinese people to hide their identities by changing their names, not using Chinese, and avoiding cultural practices (Dawis, 2013). This also happened to the Chinese Muslim community in Palembang. Even though these events in the past still leave a bit of trauma, Chinese people still have the desire to be recognized and accepted. However, recognition is an important part of respect for human diversity and human rights. Cultural diversity in a multicultural society should be maintained and respected (Sari et al., 2022). Therefore, the Chinese Muslim community continues to strive to reproduce its ethnic culture, one of which is the celebration of Chinese New Year.

The Chinese New Year celebration is a celebration in Chinese tradition that is rich in myths, legends and rituals (Tambunan et al., 2017). This celebration, known as the Spring Festival or Chun Jie, lasts for 15 days. It starts on the evening of the 23rd or 24th according to the lunar calendar and ends on the 15th day. On the last day of the Chinese New Year series there will be a celebration of the Cap Go Meh cultural festival (Rizkiyah, 2018). Chinese New Year is used as a time to gather with family, celebrate the heritage of ancestors, and ward off evil spirits (Tanggok, 2015). Chinese New Year celebrations have become an important symbol in Chinese culture throughout the world. This tradition is mainly identified with elements such as red lanterns, dragon dances, special food offerings, and fireworks that decorate the night sky (Cheristien et al., 2019; Lievander, 2017).

Traditionally, Chinese New Year celebrations are related to Confucian teachings. Chinese people who adhere to the Confucian religion consider Chinese New Year to be a legacy of their ancestors (Prasetya, 2012). However, in a broader scope, Chinese society does not only consist of individuals who adhere to Confucian or Buddhist beliefs, but also includes Chinese ethnic groups who adhere to Islam. They maintain traditional elements such as typical food and decorations, while adapting the celebration to Islamic teachings

and practices (Usman, 2009). This shows that religious diversity in Chinese society influences the way they celebrate celebrations such as Chinese New Year.

Not only Chinese Muslims in Palembang, almost all Chinese Muslim communities spread across various Southeast Asian countries and in various global diaspora communities, face their own challenges in maintaining their cultural identity while embracing Islamic values. This can be seen from various studies that show how Chinese Muslim communities in various regions face challenges in maintaining their cultural identity. For example, in Singapore, the Chinese Muslim community has ensured that they follow the regulations of the secular Singapore State, while still maintaining their Malay and Islamic identity (Sayuti, 2003). In the Tangerang region, Indonesia, the Benteng Chinese Muslim community is also experiencing a complex process of forming an ethnic and religious identity, through a process of amalgamation and the formation of a new identity amidst the social realities of the community in Tangerang (Habiburrohman, 2022). In Palembang itself, the Chinese Muslim community also experiences challenges in maintaining their ethnic identity when choosing to embrace Islam. The Palembang Chinese Muslim community then acculturated with local culture in reproducing their culture.

This study aims to investigate how Chinese New Year celebrations in Palembang become an arena for the reproduction of Chinese Muslim culture. In this context, there is an interesting dynamic between Chinese tradition and Muslim identity. By combining unique elements from both, the Chinese Muslim community created a Chinese New Year celebration that reflected their cultural and religious diversity.

This celebration can provide deep insight into the living and dynamic process of cultural reproduction, where cultural traditions can undergo adaptation and reinterpretation to meet the needs of increasingly complex communities. Apart from that, this research can also provide a new perspective on how Islamic and Chinese elements interact, enriching each other within the framework of Chinese New Year celebrations. By exploring this phenomenon, it is hoped that this study can contribute to global understanding of cultural diversity, the integration of religious values in everyday life, and the dynamics of cultural reproduction in an increasingly globally connected society.

## DISCUSSION

### Cultural Reproduction occurs through Cultural Transmission

Culture is a pattern of meanings that are intertwined in symbols that are historically transmitted (Geertz, 1992). Cultural practices will always undergo a process of reproduction and reconstruction. The final outcome of this transmission event is very dependent on the actors in the cultural arena. Cultural reproduction has a terminological meaning as an intensive process to demonstrate the existence of culture in different groups of society (Abdullah, 2006). Actors of cultural reproduction must therefore be able to adapt to groups that have different cultural backgrounds (Zurmailis & Faruk, 2017). An intensive process means being directly involved and taking part in the process of implementing the original culture in the new community environment. Then the culture or tradition, in the process of adapting to the new environment, can still survive. This is what the Palembang Chinese Muslim Community did to reproduce its culture.

For the Palembang Chinese Muslim community, culture is not just a 'frame or reference' that guides behavior in social practice, but is also a material used in the process of self-identification. Culture is a set of values that have been mutually agreed upon so that harmony in life can be realized. Culture is stored in ethnicity, complete with all the social systems it has. Apart from that, there are also values and ideas that are formed as a result of the influence of welfare and the environmental ecosystem (Muhdina, 2013). Therefore, culture for society becomes a standard measure for assessing and behaving. Good and bad values are determined based on standards that have been determined by agreement. This process of social exclusion creates symbolic differences between a community group and other community groups in their respective regions.

An important thing that cannot escape the researcher's observation is that in the process of forming the identity of the Chinese Muslim community group in Palembang, they always feel a longing for their original culture, so they reproduce their culture. Cultural reproduction refers to the process by which the original culture is preserved and passed on from one generation to the next (Bourdieu, 2018). Meanwhile, it can be said that the basis of cultural reproduction is an effort to bring the past into present life (Suarsana, 2017). This kind of thing cannot be separated from the history carried by every group that leaves its cultural area of origin. Various forms of cultural expression that describe forms of

transcription of the original culture are used as cultural reproduction techniques. This form of cultural reproduction has built a new symbolic territory. However, there was cultural contact between Chinese culture and Malay culture in Palembang, causing acculturation or cultural assimilation. It needs to be understood that discussions about cultural reproduction are always related to the process of interpreting social structures that occur in society.

In the context of Chinese New Year celebrations, the Chinese Muslim community in Palembang also faces challenges in maintaining their cultural identity while embracing Islamic values. In facing this challenge, the Chinese Muslim community must be smart in choosing what things to maintain as an ethnic identity that does not conflict with their identity as Muslims. All rituals that are contrary to the Islamic religion are eliminated, but things that are not contrary to the Islamic religion are still maintained, such as dressing in typical ethnic Chinese clothes, visiting parents, distributing red packets, and serving halal Chinese New Year food. This shows how the Chinese Muslim community adapts Chinese New Year celebrations by adapting to the teachings and practices of the Islamic religion.

### **Chinese New Year is still being debated**

The celebration of Xin Jia New Year or Chinese New Year among Chinese Muslims is a practice that still invites much debate, Islamic puritans view it as a violation of the teachings of the Islamic religion. However, most Chinese Muslims think that Chinese New Year is a festival and cultural celebration (Weng, 2019). Chinese New Year is a cultural tradition to welcome the new year and the change from winter to spring (Ranubaya et al., 2023; Ningrum, 2016; Mustajab, 2015). Even though in the Confucian religion, Chinese New Year includes the worship of gods, this is not the most important part of Chinese New Year. In Palembang, Chinese New Year celebrations have never been held in mosques. However, Chinese New Year celebrations at this mosque were held in 2003 in Yogyakarta by the Indonesian Chinese Islamic Association, specifically at the Syuhada Mosque. Previously, Conservative Muslims condemned the event as a form of heresy and haram, threatening to take action to disband the event. However, the celebration actually went very smoothly. At that time, the event received support from prominent Islamic figures and organizations, including a fatwa from the Yogyakarta MUI which allowed the celebration to be held. MUI believes that Chinese New Year celebrations in mosques have no connection with Buddhist or Confucian religious rituals. So, Chinese Muslims can

celebrate Chinese New Year as long as they do not include un-Islamic practices in the celebration. In 2005, Chinese New Year celebrations were held with lion dance performances in the courtyard of the Syuhada Mosque (Weng, 2019).

In 2006, Chinese New Year was celebrated at the An-Nadzar Mosque by holding a grand recitation because it also commemorated the nearby Hijriah New Year. At that time, the Chairman of the Yogyakarta MUI, Toha Abdurrahman, mentioned the similarities in meaning between Chinese New Year and Hijriah New Year. Chinese New Year marks the change of winter to spring, while the Hijri New Year marks the migration of the Prophet Muhammad SAW from Mecca to Medina to preach the teachings of Islam. This similarity will strengthen relations between Indonesian people from different cultural and religious backgrounds (Perdana, 2008). It must be admitted that Yogyakarta is indeed a special city. If we observe the progress of society and Muslims in Yogyakarta from a psychosocial and neurospiritual perspective, such as the religious activities that are often held around the Jogokariyan Mosque do have a unique religious experience (Jailani, 2023).

Even though Chinese Muslims in Palembang have never celebrated Chinese New Year in a mosque, most of them think that Chinese New Year is not a religious event, Chinese New Year is a cultural festival that all Chinese people of any religion have the right to celebrate.

### **Muslim Chinese New Year celebrations in Palembang**

Chinese New Year celebrations in Palembang, which are also carried out by the Chinese Muslim community, create a unique image that combines elements of Chinese culture and Islamic values. In the context of Islamic history, each region has important figures who played a role in building the foundations that formed a unique local Islamic pattern (Huda, 2021).

Palembang, as a city with rich ethnic and cultural diversity, provides an attractive stage for the Chinese Muslim community to celebrate the celebration. Chinese New Year celebrations in Palembang are always characterized by typical Chinese festivities and traditions. Bustling traditional markets, striking red decorations, as well as lanterns and dragon statues are an integral part of this celebration. The Chinese Muslim community participates in this tradition with full enthusiasm, demonstrating their involvement in the cultural heritage that has long existed among Palembang society. Typical Chinese culinary

delights, such as buns, spring rolls and other typical Chinese New Year cakes, are a common sight in Palembang during this celebration. The Muslim Chinese community in this city gives a unique touch by presenting halal versions of these dishes. This creates a culinary experience that combines traditional Chinese delicacies with the halal principles adhered to by the Chinese Muslim community. Chinese New Year celebrations in Palembang are also a time to gather with family. Similar to the Chinese Muslim community in Surabaya, they understand the importance of maintaining family traditions and celebrating moments of togetherness (Sofinadya & Warsono, 2023). These family reunions often include various activities in accordance with Islamic beliefs.

A Chinese Muslim from Palembang, Merry Efendi, always celebrates Chinese New Year with his extended family from various religions. The woman who acts as the caretaker of the Ceng Ho Mosque in Palembang admitted that her extended family agreed that Chinese New Year is not a ritual of worship for a particular religion but rather a tradition carried out by Chinese people when winter changes to spring. During Chinese New Year celebrations, Merry Effedi, whose Chinese name is 'Huang Fung Hua', still gives red packets to her parents as a form of devotion to her parents and also gives red packets to her unmarried siblings or nieces. Distributing red packets is a typical tradition that always occurs at Chinese New Year celebrations (Morita, 2018; Dewi, 2019). For Merry Efendi, as long as he does not participate in prayer rituals and religious worship that he does not believe in, this does not disturb the Islamic faith that he believes in. Merry Efendi values tolerance in order to live side by side between cultures and religions.

*"As a Chinese Muslim who still has parents, I still celebrate Chinese New Year with my extended family. Chinese New Year is not a Confucian religious ritual, but a tradition carried out on the change of winter to spring. Even though in Indonesia there is no winter and spring, we welcome with the joy of celebrating Chinese New Year as part of our ethnic culture, I myself ensure that I do not do things that violate Islamic law during the celebration."* (Interview, Merry Efendi, 22 January 2023).

The author feels very lucky to be invited to participate in the 2023 Xin Jia or Chinese New Year celebrations which are celebrated at the home of this middle-aged woman's parents, so that the author can truly witness the warmth that is built in a multicultural family. Merry Efendi's entire family and relatives were also present and rejoiced on the

Chinese New Year day which was reported to have the water rabbit zodiac sign. This state of pluralism cannot be separated from Gus Dur's role in revoking Presidential Instruction no. 14/1967 so that ethnic Chinese are now free to celebrate Chinese New Year. Gus Dur was a figure who was very tolerant towards Chinese ethnic minorities (Subarsino, 2008). In other words, Gus Dur was a leader who had a democratic character and was more open towards the religion of his people (Safei, 2020).

Eldi, Merry Efendi's older brother, a businessman whose Chinese name is 'Asiung', showed the author his happiness at being able to gather with his extended family in Palembang. He is very grateful that he can still celebrate Xin Jia with his parents who are old and confined to a wheelchair.

*"This is what our parents' house looks like during Xin Jia New Year. Those of us who live outside the island all go home and gather here. Celebrate with great joy our new year. Thankfully our parents are still alive."* (Interview, Eldi, 22 January 2023)

Apart from Merry Efendi and his extended family who are still celebrating Xin Jia or Chinese New Year, Herwansyah who is currently actively serving at the Faculty of Ushuluddin and Islamic Thought as Head of the Religions Study Program and Yanto is actively serving at the Faculty of Adab and Humanities and holds the position as Head of the Library Science Study Program, both of whom serve at UIN Raden Fatah Palembang, who are also converted Chinese Muslims, still participate in visiting their families or relatives who celebrate Chinese New Year. If Merry Efendi celebrates Chinese New Year at her parents' house together with another family, then Herwansyah and Yanto respect their relatives who celebrate Chinese New Year by visiting them, just like visiting during Eid al-Fitr in the Islamic religion. This is done to maintain inter-ethnic brotherhood. Chinese New Year is indeed an event for friendship and strengthening brotherhood in social interactions that have experienced acculturation with local culture (Prabowo, 2020). The presence of Chinese New Year can reduce tensions between communities (Subarsino, 2008).

Herwansyah, whose Chinese name is 'Bong Kon Khin', and Yanto, whose Chinese name is 'Tan Kian Sing', have the same point of view regarding the implementation of



traditions and culture. As long as the tradition or culture does not interfere with the faith and does not conflict with the teachings of the Islamic religion, then this is not a problem.

*“Chinese or Chinese traditions as long as they do not conflict with Islamic law can always be used by Chinese Muslims in their daily lives.”* (Interview, Herwansyah, 21 December 2022)

Chinese culture that does not violate Islamic rules needs to continue to be preserved, apart from maintaining one's identity as an ethnic Chinese person, it can also be used to broadcast to the public to introduce the other side of the beauty of Islam that exists in Chinese society.

*“Using culture that is in harmony with religious guidance cannot make someone an infidel. In fact, Chinese culture can be used as a religious message.”* (Interview, Yanto, 23 December 2022)

Chinese New Year celebrations in Palembang for the Chinese Muslim community are an occasion to celebrate their dual identity, maintaining Chinese cultural roots while practicing Islamic values. Within this framework, they not only celebrate typical celebrations, but also contribute to the cultural diversity that enriches the city of Palembang as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

Chinese New Year celebrations in Palembang, involving the Chinese Muslim community, create an interesting harmony between Chinese cultural heritage and Islamic values. In celebrations full of festivity and tradition, the Chinese Muslim community in Palembang depicts a dynamic and unique cultural reproduction. The conclusion of this celebration can be taken as evidence that harmonization between local culture and religious faith can occur naturally and meaningfully. The intercultural solidarity found in this celebration reflects positive integration amidst the city's diversity. The Chinese Muslim community actively participates in joint activities with other communities, building intercultural bridges and creating an environment that supports harmony. Thus, the Chinese New Year celebration in Palembang is a clear example of how the reproduction of Chinese Muslim culture creates space for the fusion of Chinese cultural roots and Islamic values. As a celebration that celebrates diversity and harmony, this event emphasizes that the richness of multiple identities can be a source of pride and balance in an ever-changing society.

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### **Interview**

- Eldi (Muslim Chinese businessman), 2023
- Herwansyah (Head of the Religious Study Program at UIN Raden Fatah Palembang), 2022
- Merry Efendi (Management of the Ceng Ho Mosque in Palembang), 2023
- Yanto (Head of the Library Science Study Program at UIN Raden Fatah Palembang), 2022