

## Chinese Tradition Practices by the Chinese Muslim Community of Surabaya

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**Abstract:** This research describes Chinese Muslim in practicing Chinese traditions in Surabaya, Indonesia. Qualitative approach on data collection was undertaken, using questionnaire followed by participative observation, in-depth interview and focus group discussion. The ethnographic results came up to three significantly different groups of Chinese Muslim: (1) Those who celebrate Chinese traditions and practice them as the religious rituals; (2) Those who practice Chinese traditions as well as practice them as the religious rituals, but the rituals they practice were changed with Islamic elements; (3) Those who participated in celebrating the tradition only and refuse to participate in the religious rituals. These differences appeared probably due to their ethnic and religious identities.

**Key words:** Education • festivals • attributes • inheritance • funeral

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### INTRODUCTION

Islam was not something new for the Chinese ethnic in Indonesia. History proved that Chinese Muslim exist in Indonesia since 15<sup>th</sup> century such as *Hui* sect and *Han* [1]. Some experts even claimed that the Chinese people played an important role for the spreading of Islam in Java [2]. Formerly most Chinese became Muslim because they tried to avoid social discrimination, to have a safe feeling especially in commercial activities and to get sympathy from local people who mostly Muslim, or because their spouse was Muslim as well as their friends [3]. They also hoped that by being Muslim, they could totally assimilate and welcomed by the natives. Chinese people embrace Islam were in fact also alienated by some Chinese. A part of non-Muslim Chinese considered that by embracing Islam they deny their Chineseness and separate their relationship from the Chinese community. Thus Chinese Muslim felt not to be treated well by their relatives and even felt that their family hated them [3]. However, there were also Chinese who became open hearted Muslim. They decided to become Muslim by religious reasons [4].

Supported by the pluralism in Indonesia, recently Chinese Muslim joined the celebration of Chinese traditions, which were allowed to be celebrated openly in Indonesia. By participating in the Chinese tradition, the Chinese Muslim show to their fellow Chinese that they still remain Chinese and to their Muslim brothers they show they are still Muslim even they have a Chinese origin. The essential message was that ethnic and religion did not confront each other.

The Cheng Ho mosque was built with its specific Chinese architecture in Surabaya. By building the mosque, they show their identity as a Chinese ethnic who embraces Islam even they still try to hold on the Chinese tradition [5]. Chinese Muslim tried to show their identity of being Chinese along as being Muslim. This was shown by the Muslim Chinese community in celebrating *Chunjie* (a Chinese new year's celebration). In 2003 for example, the Chinese Muslim in Jogjakarta celebrated for the first time *Chunjie* by worshiping and kneeling gratefully in the Syuhada mosque, one of the biggest and famous mosque locally and the Chinese Muslim in Surabaya celebrated it by praying together in the Cheng Ho mosque [6, 7].

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These showed that even they have Islam as a religion, they still held on the Chinese tradition. Indeed, there might be some specific performances occurred in practicing the rituals that were investigated in the current research. The objective was to draw basic data on how far they assimilate in the Indonesian community through religious perspective.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Questionnaires were prepared for collecting preliminary profiles of respondents. The questionnaires were distributed to Chinese Muslim registered in Surabaya and commenced in March 2006. The respondents were Chinese Muslim family which was classified into two groups, i.e. pure-blood and mixed-blood Chinese. Pure-blood ones were from China both their parents and grand parents. Mixed-blood ones were ascendants whose father or mother was no longer Chinese, or their grand parents were Chinese but their parents were no longer pure-blood Chinese. It was difficult and time consuming to get information on the proportion of Chinese Muslims in relation to non-Muslim Chinese in Surabaya as well as Indonesia. For comparison, Chinese Muslim was about 0.5 % of the Chinese population and the Chinese population was 3.5 % of the Indonesian population in 1983 [9]. Assuming the proportion was adopted, Surabaya population was 3 million in which the Chinese population was 105,000 people and the Chinese Muslim was about 525 people. At household level, the number of people was 5 on average and therefore, the number of Chinese Muslim was circa 105 families. The Author was able to recognize fifty respondents for their blood origin in July 2006. Hence, this research covered sampling population of 50 % the Chinese Muslim in Surabaya.

Twenty-three respondents accepted for joining participative observation. This was aiming to discuss which traditions they still performed and to enrich the understanding about the social context from the respondent. On this participative observation, the Author actively took an opportunity to involve in respondent activities such as social, religious and home activities.

Seventeen respondents agreed to be treated with in-depth interview. This in-depth interview was supposed to collect more personal data. The Author considered the importance of repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and the respondents. This directed towards understanding the respondents perspective on their lives, experiences, or situations as expressed in their own words. There were two approaches in conducting the in-depth interview. The first was a focus interview, which was open-ended and measurable. This interview was applied to them who were convenient with the interview. The second type of interview was applied to them who were inconvenient by being interviewed and this was conducted by daily conversation and discussion on casual things. The Author and respondents asked among others about their family or personality, their opinion about Chinese, Islam, their position as a Chinese Muslim, difference after being Muslim, or their opinion about Chinese Muslim. Focused Group Discussion (FGD) was applied for limited number of persons who were willing to be a moderator for specific topic discussion. FGD provided a healthy interaction among the members without wondering something [8].

Data obtained from the participative observation, in-depth interview and FGD were analyzed by ethnographic method. This was a qualitative description of social phenomena from the field research. Ethnographic could be characterized by holistic perspective, describing public as a whole, or can be focused at a special event or situation in a bigger social context. Ethnographic approach focused on the understanding the behavior of a context by the researcher participating in the specific research event. This approach delivered a descriptive report by using several data that had been collected by observation and interview.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Education attitude towards children:** All respondents agreed that education treatment was equally applied between their sons and daughters. They would support their children for choosing education and enhancing skill as well as other informal one such as social relationships at local community level. Thus education perspectives followed universal modern society

without traditional barriers. Religious education attracted the children to be a good Muslim due to religious reasons. In addition, family education was nothing with an effort to increase their public position as found by The [3] and Jacobsen [9], or taking advantage of the Islam religion for their own purpose [9, 10].

**Traditional Chinese festivals:** Ten respondents performed all Chinese tradition, but limited to the celebration only. The rituals were not performed due to their belief that it was prohibited by religion. When they attend a funeral, they only hold the *yosua* (Buddhist praying stick), but emptied their hearts by not praying. On *Chunjie* new year they only visited their relatives, but did not pray at the night before *Chunjie*. On *Qingming* day, a tradition to clean their ancestor graves, they did it on another day. Praying at the graves was carried out as the Islam way. It was neither obliged to spray flowers nor brought food as used to apply in Confucious tradition. Seven respondents performed all Chinese traditions such as dinner gatherings, relative visits, even the rituals. In their opinion that before they embrace Islam, they were of Chinese origin and the tradition to honor their superiors was obligatory, even they also known very well all Islamic teaching, diligent in praying or fasting. Two respondents performed Chinese customs because of their mother but they performed the Chinese tradition only occasionally. Four respondents already considered themselves as natives. They disposed off all their Chinese identity. They did not even remember the Chinese customs. Absolutely they performed only Islam traditions.

**Symbolic food festivals:** Food festivals were practiced such as moon cake and bakcang. Bakcang was a pork meat inside sticky rice, wrapped with bamboo leaves and stringed into a three pointed cone. Two respondents claimed that everything doing with Chinese food must contain pork, even moon cake skin could only gloss with pork oil. Because of attitude and belief they did not eat moon cake and bakcang that made by Chinese people. Indeed, they eat the foods that made by themselves. Nine respondents choose the cake shop in which the foods were produced. If they trusted the shop, they will eat the foods. There exist respondent who never bought or got the foods from their relatives. Also respondent who formerly Confucian did not eat any animal meat at all. Five respondents still eat pork because of their personal opinion. It was allowed if not causing vomit. They also eat all traditional Chinese cakes in addition to moon cake and bakcang.

**Chinese attributes:** This was concerned on displaying Chinese attributes such as red paper lanterns, Chinese paintings, cultural arts, misfortune-avoiding items, calligraphic sayings, etc. It was found that ten respondents still displayed them. They argued that culture and art had nothing to do with religion. Six respondents would not display it and if they received it from someone, they would only put it in their desk. There was found the respondent who did not display any Chinese attributes because of he or she wanted to be Indonesian stylish form. This was confirmed with the study of Ma [11] in his work with Chinese Muslim in Malaysia. Chinese who embrace Islam were no longer considered to be someone with a Chinese ethnic but were metaphored to be Malay ethnic. In that case, many Chinese Muslims were abandoned by their families too [9]. In addition, there was a mixing attribute name, composing of local and Chinese, as a compromise attitude.

**Hand over:** Inheritance or business hand over was given to the oldest son according to Chinese tradition. Nearly all of them said they had no business to inherit. Even if they possess it, they would act equal to their sons and daughters. Three respondents would follow the Islamic law by giving their sons more than their daughters.

**About their funeral:** According Chinese tradition the funeral must used the first class wood with its specific appearance. Six respondents leave it to their families, even about the tradition or Islamic custom to be performed. They believed that someone dead would not bother anything as long the families or friends pay respect. But eleven respondents insisted the funeral must be performed according the Islamic law.

## **CONCLUSION**

The current findings revealed that performing Chinese traditions for Chinese Muslim were mostly adjusted to socio-cultural environment, external families and relations and factors inside their own family conditions. Almost of Chinese Muslim performed the traditions without affecting their obligation for religious rules of law.

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