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# "By Race, I am Chinese; and by Grace, I am Christian": Chineseness and Christianity in Indonesia

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## 8 “By race, I am Chinese; and by grace, I am Christian”

### Negotiating Chineseness and Christianity in Indonesia

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Uniting Chinese culture with Christian faith may be likened to an enterprise which seeks to reconcile two opposing forces. The reason is simple, for an ethnic Chinese who holds on to his/her customs and traditions, Christianity is but a “Westerner’s religion.” In this “Westerner’s religion,” culture – in particular, Chinese customs that highly respect ancestor worship – does not appear to be highly valued. To many Christians, Chinese culture may be perceived as nothing more than incoherent and irrational myths that are impossible to reason. Such a conflict between Chineseness and Christianity has been ongoing for centuries.

(Berlian 2008: 164, my translation).

Are Chineseness and Christianity<sup>1</sup> truly incompatible as suggested above? Do they represent a “clash of civilizations” as Huntington (1993) famously hypothesized? What accounts for the conflicts between Chinese culture and Christian faith? How have Chinese Christian churches negotiated their religious and cultural identity?

In the article entitled “Faith and Chinese Culture” from which the quotation that opens this chapter comes, Chinese Indonesian Evangelist Willy Berlian writes, “by Race, I am Chinese; and by Grace, I am Christian.” As highlighted by Berlian, underlying the assumption of the “age-old” tension between Chineseness and Christianity is a more salient and complex debate regarding the relationship between culture and religion. Although discussed *ad nauseam* by philosophers, theologians and scholars, such a debate between culture and religion remains highly relevant in today’s context (see, for example, Keane 2007; Roy 2010). A key element of Christian conversion is the separation of the sacred from the profane. This is manifest in the clean break from the pagan past when Christianity was made the state religion of Rome in the fourth century (Jasper 2003). The “anti-pagan” movement was replicated in the sixteenth and seventeenth century during the Reformation, when the Protestants sought to purge “idolatrous” traditions of magic, exorcism, divination, witchcraft, religious charms and even Catholic practices of worship of the saints and the Virgin Mary (Yang 2005). As an exclusive and absolutist religion, Christianity is wary of syncretism, which it sees as a threat to and a compromise of the faith.<sup>2</sup> However, in the Chinese tradition, there is a lack of intrinsic differentiation between culture

and religion, making syncretism of practices the norm (see Yao and Zhao 2010; Goossaert and Palmer 2011). Consequently, Huntington (1993) and Kuo (2010) have referred to the confrontation between Confucianism and Christianity as a “clash of civilizations.”

To find a “meeting point” between Christianity and Chineseness, Evangelist Berlian (2008) attempts to reconcile several practices of Chinese customs with Christian teachings through a creative reinterpretation and contextualization of the two. He highlights the commonalities between several Christian and Chinese festivals, and carefully distinguishes elements within Chinese customs that he considers as part of Chinese culture and tradition from those which he views as religious practices and rituals. Through a laborious differentiation of the profane and secular from the sacred and religious, Berlian is able to offer advice to his readers on which Chinese customs to observe and practice, and which to discard. Having clarified such a distinction, he concludes with this proclamation: “by race, I am Chinese, and by grace, I am Christian” to show that it is possible to be both Chinese and Christian at the same time.

The relationship between culture and religion is at once complex and convoluted. Prefixes have been added to the term “culture” when discussed in relation to religion: for example, the term “deculturate” is used when religion eradicates “pagan” culture; “acculturate” is used when religion adapts to the mainstream culture; and “inculturate” is used when religion tries to establish itself at the center of a given culture (Roy 2010: 33).<sup>3</sup> Berlian’s statement of being “Chinese by race and Christian by grace” highlights a discursive possibility where “race” (or culture) and religion can coexist as long as they remain separate and distinct. It is easy to read Berlian’s statement as exemplary of the acknowledgment of multiple identities inspired by the postmodern fad. However, such a reading does not capture the power differences between the two identities, among other things. The fact that Berlian has defined which Chinese customs are to be discontinued and which to keep shows that religious identity takes precedence over culture. However, Roy’s exposition shows that a total separation between culture and religion is fallacious (Roy 2010). The course of deculturation, acculturation or inculturation that occurs when religion meets culture is not an end in itself but reflects an ongoing process of negotiation. And it is with such a process of negotiation which this chapter is concerned.

To address the negotiation between Chineseness and Christianity in Indonesia, it is necessary to first discuss the early encounters between Confucianism and Christianity in Imperial China<sup>4</sup> and explore the Chinese concept of “religion” (or lack thereof). The underlying idea permeating this chapter is the obstacle that remains for any conversion to Christianity, associated mainly with one’s need to remain both Chinese and Christian at the same time. Such an obstacle is not confined to a particular, localized region, but rather appears to be a transnational one. This is especially so when many long-standing elements of Chinese culture, which are deeply rooted in Confucian traditions, continue to claim relevance in the definition of global Chineseness. The obstacle remains insurmountable due to the difficulties associated with breaking free from traditional customs and rituals, and hence the discussion of China provides us with the background

to enter into a foray in search of the negotiations that are present in Indonesia today. Moreover, the study of any Christian community should not be undertaken in isolation, as “no Christian community is purely local in nature” (Keane 2007: 40). Hence, examples from the experience of diasporic Chinese Christian communities will be discussed in the earlier part of this chapter to further illustrate the universal characteristics present in the negotiation.

The examination of Chinese Christianity in Indonesia entails a discussion of “Chineseness” – ethnicity, identity, language and cultural resources – in relation to nationalism in Indonesia and state ethnic policies. The dual identity of being Chinese and Christian is more problematic in Indonesia than elsewhere because both Chineseness and Christianity historically epitomize “foreignness.” Occupying less than 2 and 9 percent of the population respectively, ethnic Chinese and Christians are both minorities in one of the largest Muslim countries in the world (Suryadinata *et al.* 2003). The background understanding of the Chinese Indonesian minority as a marginalized group among the Muslim majority and their inclination to convert to Christianity set the fundamental landscape to investigate this negotiation. Beyond the negotiation between culture (Chineseness) and religion (Christianity), the study of identity politics in postcolonial Indonesia also involves the new-found national identity of Indonesianness. As such, the later part of this chapter will examine the agency reflected in the different strategies taken by Chinese churches in Indonesia in negotiating and articulating their multiple identities. The chapter ends with a case study on the contestations in the celebration of Chinese New Year (*Imlek*) among Chinese Christians in Indonesia to reiterate and exemplify the continuous nature of the negotiation between culture and religion.

### The “foreignness” of Christianity in Imperial China

Anti-Christian movements in Imperial China can be more accurately described as anti-foreign and anti-imperialist. In Qing Dynasty China, Christianity was condemned as a “foreign teaching/religion” (*yangjiao*) that embodied Western doctrines controlled by foreign authorities. The sardonic phrase, “one more Christian, one less Chinese” was frequently used to mock Chinese Christian converts to imply that they are “traitors to the nation” (Yang 1999: 53). Yang argues that, for most Chinese in the early twentieth century, “Christianity and Chineseness became incompatible, both culturally and politically” (1999: 53). The nature of such conflict can be understood as twofold: cultural on one hand, and political on the other. The former is related to the perceived incompatibility between Christianity and Chinese beliefs (such as Confucianism) and ritual practices (such as ancestor worship), which will be discussed in the next section. The latter has to be read in the historical context when Christianity was associated with, and seen as, a tool of Western imperialism.

The Jesuit missionaries who first came to China in the late sixteenth century were largely acculturated – they participated in local customs, learned the Chinese language and respected Confucian rituals. The Emperor Kangxi found such an accommodationist version of Catholicism acceptable and declared

the religion an "orthodox teaching" in 1693. However, the Franciscans and Dominicans who came later strongly objected to the Jesuit practice of accommodation to Chinese customs and saw it as "a weak and unchristian compromise with 'heathenism'" (Moffett 2007: 121). In the early eighteenth century, Rome took issue with the Jesuits' loyalty to Confucian rituals, which it saw as a religious practice comparable to paganism. The pope subsequently instructed Chinese Catholics to break away from such rituals. Emperor Yongzheng, the successor to Kangxi, was offended by such an assertion of power by a foreign religious authority over his subjects. Consequently, in 1724, the emperor banned Christianity and condemned the religion as a "heterodox teaching" (*xiejiao* – the term which is also used by the current Chinese Communist Party to outlaw the Falun Gong) (Madsen 2000: 272).

Nevertheless, in the nineteenth century, official restrictions against Christianity were lifted due to pressure from the Western imperialists. Christian missionaries once again returned to the Middle Kingdom, but were now accompanied by *gunboats* and a *different attitude*. In contrast to the acculturated Jesuits who came in the seventeenth century, missionaries who arrived with the colonizers in the nineteenth century came with a civilizing mission to deculturate and inculturate, and were involved in "shaking and tearing up the Confucian world order" (Young 1983: 126). With the rise of nationalism in China, Christianity was seen as "spiritual poison" colluding with opium used by the insidious West to intoxicate and defeat the Chinese nation. In this regard, Christianity was conflated with foreign intrusion and dominance.

### The Chinese concept of "religion"

There is generally a lack of a term for "religion" in Chinese culture. An examination of the etymology of the term "*zong jiao*" ("religion", lit. teachings of the clan lineage) in modern Chinese reveals that the term only came into existence in China in the late nineteenth century (Yang 1999: 47; Yang 2005; Lu *et al.* 2008). The second character "*jiao*," commonly used to refer to major world religions such as *jidu jiao* (Christianity), *fo jiao* (Buddhism), *hui or yisilan jiao* (Islam) and *dao jiao* (Taoism), was historically used to mean "teachings" rather than religion. The Chinese popular folk practices of "*san jiao*" (Three Teachings) encompass Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Hence, Ninian Smart objected to the Western assumption that three "religions" existed in China and insisted that the *sanjiao* are but three parts of a "single functioning system" (cited in Yao 1996: 35; see also Yao and Zhao 2010).

Syncretism of practices in *san jiao* means that it is fluid in its organization, non-institutional, has no clearly demarcated doctrinal boundary or membership restriction and is non-monotheistic – unlike the Abrahamic traditions – as multiple deities can be worshipped in one temple (Kuah-Pearce 2009). With such pluralism in Chinese belief, Yang (1999) argues that it is orthopraxy (correct practice) such as filial piety and ancestor worship, rather than orthodoxy (correct belief or doctrines), that has maintained cultural unity among the Chinese people. In other words, traditional rituals and cultural symbols are essential to

the definition of Chineseness. As an organized religion with clear institutional structure, doctrines and membership requirements, Christianity not only differs from Chinese beliefs in form, but also in substance.

This brings us to the discussion of the first character in the term "*zong jiao*" (religion). The word "*zong*" (clan lineage) reminds us of the importance of the clan in Chinese psyche and tradition. It has been claimed that the clan is the "basic social organization of Confucian China" (Smith 2005: 203; see also Yang 2005; Yao and Zhao 2010). Smith further explains:

The clan is a visible entity, it is rooted in history, and certain objects represent this history, such as ancestral tablets, a clan temple, ancestral graves, and a clan genealogy. These tangible entities embody transcendent values ... The system provided the individual with a sense of identity and a system of values.

(Smith 2005: 196)

However, Western missionaries, such as the Dominicans and Franciscans in dynastic China, regarded ancestor worship and traditional marriage, burial and grave sweeping ceremonies as "heathenish-idolatrous" or "pagan" practices and preached against them. In fact, the colonial project of Christian mission involved cultural uprooting and estrangement for Christians in the colonized world. In order to become Christians, non-Western believers "had to abandon their culture and their customs and become Westerners" (Frederiks 2009: 9). Kane remarks that "if the missionaries had been able to find a functional substitute for ancestor worship, the number of [Chinese] Christian converts would doubtless have been greater than it was" (1978: 128). Yet, the Eurocentric definition of religion, coupled with the culturally exclusive, morally absolutist and uncompromising stance of the missionaries, had prevented a deeper and more sophisticated interaction between Confucianism and Christianity.

The controversial debate on whether Confucianism is a religion or tradition, philosophy or orthodox teaching began only after Christianity came to China (for details of the debate, see Young 1983; Yao 1996; Kuo 2005; Moffett 2007; Kuo 2010).<sup>5</sup> Confucianism has been the pervasive ideology of the Chinese state since the Tang Dynasty and has become the guiding philosophy of Chinese life (Kuah-Pearce 2009: 26). It is commonly accepted that Confucianism is the cornerstone of Chinese civilization, although such romanticism often assumes that Confucianism is monolithic and overlooks the various evolutionary reinterpretation and manifestations of Confucianism in Chinese history. Western missionaries tended to catalog culture under "beliefs, superstitions and rites" and it was "from the outside" that Chinese customs and Confucian rituals were defined as a religion (Roy 2010: 32). In fact, there is no clear distinction between philosophy, politics and religion in Chinese tradition. It has further been maintained that "to the ancient Chinese, the religious point of view was not so different from the philosophical or political point of view that it had to be named by a different term" (Yao 1996: 35). The introduction of the Western/modern concept of "religion" and the encounter with Christianity have compelled the Chinese to

unpack and redefine Chineseness, Confucianism, customs and culture, as well as to differentiate religious rituals from secular traditions. As a result, there was an indigenization of Christianity in China, which took the form of sinicization to purge the “foreign” and “imperialist” association with the religion (for details, see Fallman 2008; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Lim 2012).

To avoid the pitfalls of syncretism, Chinese converts had to make a clear break from the aspects of the clan system and customary rituals such as ancestral rites which were seen as idolatry. However, such rituals are often intertwined with their identity and membership in society. Till the present day, the need to break free from these customs remains an insurmountable obstacle for the Chinese to accept Christianity. For instance, in the case of rural Taiwan, Chao (2006) argues that Christianity is seen as a foreign religion and a violation of Chinese cultural norms. This is because the faith prohibits the filial duty of ancestor worship and the participation in temple festivals and donations, which are considered duties of all villagers. Such exclusion forces Chinese Christians to organize themselves in new communities and structures based on their faith.

Yet, Chinese Christians have embraced the values and certain aspects of Confucian philosophy they consider as secular and as part of their cultural heritage. Chao argues that these Chinese churches are able to “retain cherished Confucian values about family and ascetic ethics and still incorporate Christianity’s teaching on the supernatural” (2006: 195). Sociologists have also noted that Confucian social values such as success, hard work, thrift and delayed gratification fit in comfortably with what Weber (1992) describes as the “Protestant ethic” or “this-worldly asceticism” (Yang 1999; Bays 2003; Hall 2006).<sup>6</sup> In fact, in Yang’s comprehensive study on Chinese Christians in America, he tactfully documents the ways in which Chinese Christians regard Confucian values as “valuable complements for life in contemporary American society” (1999: 147). Chinese Christians in the USA have attempted to integrate Confucianism into Christianity and to revitalize Confucianism through Christianity. They see Confucian moral values as compatible with conservative evangelical Christianity and consider the values helpful in offering solutions to the vices and challenges of the modern secular world (Yang 1999). In this regard, the Chinese church in the USA has become an institution in which these moral values can be maintained and through which they can be passed on to the younger generation. In contemporary China, Chinese Christians strive to “sinicize” their faith by adopting Chinese cultural elements in the practice of their faith in order to “correct the traditional negative impression of ‘one more Christian, one less Chinese’” (Zhou 2006: 198). Hence, even though the marriage between Chineseness and Christianity is far from perfect, the result of such an ongoing negotiation can only mean that the label “Chinese Christian” is no longer a misnomer.

### Debating Chineseness and Christianity in colonial Indonesia

As in the case of dynastic China, Christianity was seen by Chinese in the Dutch East Indies as a Dutch religion and converting to Christianity was equivalent to ceasing to be Chinese. Being a “Dutch” religion, Christianity occupied a higher

status in the colonial social, economic and political hierarchy, which unwittingly reinforced its foreignness. However, Nagata (2005: 113) points out that some *peranakan* Chinese strategically converted to Christianity for political and social positioning:

A small fraction, however, who consider themselves “Chinese by race, but Dutch by law” engaged in a familiar custom of emulating their rulers and converting to Christianity, a move seen as a statement of acculturation, trying to “be Dutch,” reflected in the popular phrase for conversion, *masuk Belanda* (“to become Dutch”).<sup>7</sup>

It is not clear whether the converts became true believers of the faith and whether they were ostracized by the Chinese community as a result of such conversion. But it is clear that the missionaries demanded from the converts a clear break with their past practices.

Heated debates emerged between Christians and Confucians in the Indies in the early years of the twentieth century concerning what constituted “Chineseness” and whether Confucianism was a “true religion.” This occurred during the period of the Confucian revival movement and the spread of pan-Chinese nationalism to the Indies in the late nineteenth century. The Dutch Protestant missionaries, like their counterparts in China, were obdurate in drawing a line between the sacred and the profane, and in making sure that the line was not crossed.<sup>8</sup> They debated on which Chinese customs a Chinese Christian could retain and which must be abandoned as heathenish. They also dismissed traditional Chinese rituals as superstitions and denied that Confucianism constituted a religion (Coppel 2002).

A controversy broke out between the Malay-language mission newspaper, *Bentara Hindia*, and the Malay-language weekly which disseminated Confucian teachings, *Li Po*. From 1902 to 1904, Chinese Christians and Confucianists carried out debates about Christianity and Confucianism in the newspapers. Having studied the content of the debate, Coppel concludes that “in general, the Christian position was more absolutist and authoritarian, the Confucianist position more relativist and open” (2002: 306). Ironically, partly in reaction to the criticisms of the Christians and to the need for “religious rationalization,” the Confucians institutionalized Confucianism into an organized religion with godhead, prophet, scriptures, creeds and rituals (Coppel 2002). Also interesting to note is how the Confucian church subsequently “Christianized Confucianism” (Kuo 2010) by borrowing aspects of Christian liturgy into its own rituals, such as the provision of a Confucian priest to preach a sermon and lead the congregation in prayer in a weekly Sunday service (see Coppel 2002: chapter 15).<sup>9</sup>

The debate between Christian and non-Christian Chinese continued in the 1920s through to the 1930s, except that by then they had a new player, the Sam Kauw Hwee – an organization of Chinese folk religion that fused together Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism (similar to the *sanjiao* in China discussed earlier). Many Indies Chinese perceived Christian evangelism as a threat to their ethnic and cultural identity. The Sam Kauw Hwee and the Kong Kauw Hwee

(Confucian Religion Society) equated Chineseness with Chinese religion and an adherence to Confucianism, and saw those who converted to Christianity as abandoning their Chinese identity. To counter such perception, Chinese Christians began to establish their own ethnic church. According to Setiabudi (1995), the Chinese church had to try to erase the “foreignness” of Christianity in the eyes of the Indies Chinese by indigenizing Christianity, and by “relativizing Chineseness” from its religious essence. Although the Chinese Christian church inherited its doctrines from Dutch missionaries, it had become independent from the Dutch mission (discussed below). The aim was to prove that Christianity was not a “Dutch religion” and that to be Chinese, one need not necessarily adhere to Chinese religions or Confucianism.

### Transnational links with China

The challenges faced by the Chinese church in the Indies in reconciling Chinese culture with Christianity were greatly relieved with the visits of John Sung in 1939. Born in Putien in Southern China, John Sung was the son of a Methodist minister. Sung became a Christian evangelist and revivalist upon his return to China after obtaining a PhD in science in the United States (see Lyall 2004). As an American-trained scientist, Sung chose to go against the tide by wearing a Chinese gown instead of a Western suit throughout his ministry in China. Dying in 1944, at the relatively young age of 42, Sung was not only commemorated as one of the greatest evangelists of China but also a pioneer in contextualizing and indigenizing the Christian faith in China (Lim 2012). Setiabudi argues that, “Sung represented strongly the fusion between what was Christian and what was Chinese, so that he was able to help many nominal Chinese Christians to overcome the felt foreignness of Christianity and to cross that ‘Chinese’ obstacle to baptism at that time” (1995: 68).

John Sung made several epic mission journeys to Southeast Asia in the 1930s, where he converted thousands of Chinese and trained many Chinese Christians to be evangelists (Wijaya 2002: 81). Sung’s visits to Southeast Asia also highlighted the early regional and global nature of exchanges among Chinese Christians. As Wong and Ngu (2010) argue, “The southeastern Chinese seaboard and the archipelagic world of Southeast Asia was a shared and unified mission site.” In the Dutch Indies, the faith of many nominal Chinese believers was rekindled and thousands of non-believers were baptized and converted to Christianity at Sung’s revival meetings. His meetings were so popular among the Indies Chinese that they would close their shops to attend the meetings even during weekdays. As Lim notes, “It is quite a sight in Surabaya to see rows and rows of [Chinese-owned] shops closed with a notice: ‘Closed for the week – Mission Campaign’” (2012: 222). Unsurprisingly, a Dutch missionary in Central Java who witnessed Sung’s campaign wrote in 1949 that “Chinese churches in Java are still alive today only through the blessing of the revival brought by Dr Sung” (cited in Lyall 2004: 232).

Another example of the transnational exchanges of Chinese Christianity between China and the Indies is the founding of the Bond Kristen Tionghoa

(BKT, lit. Chinese Christian Union) in 1926. The BKT aimed to unite all Chinese churches in the Dutch colony regardless of their denominations, doctrines and backgrounds. It also encouraged Chinese churches in the Indies to break away from Western missions. The establishment of the BKT was inspired by the National Christian Council of China in the Republic of China, founded in 1922, which advocated similar objectives. One of the core members of the Bond Kristen Tionghoa was a body of Chinese churches established by the Dutch and Chinese missionaries in the early 1900s called the Tiong Hoa Kie Tok Kaw Hwee (THKTKH, Hokkien for Chinese Christian Church). Some congregations within the THKTKH were very much China-oriented. For example, the THKTKH in Mangga Besar “neither felt that it was a Dutch church, nor an Indonesian church. But this church felt emotional ties with churches in China” (Kurnia and Hale 1999: 40).

In 1939, due to disagreements and incompatibility with the influence of the Dutch mission in the THKTKH, the Mangga Besar and a few other congregations broke away from THKTKH and founded the Chung Hua Chi Tu Chiao Hui (CHCTCH, the Mandarin version of THKTKH), and aligned themselves more closely to the churches in China. The CHCTCH was commonly known as the “Nationalist Chinese Church” because of its anti-Dutch, anti-missionary and pro-China sentiment (Hartono 1999: 25). Chinese churches in colonial Indonesia such as the CHCTCH had tried to erase the foreignness of Christianity by indigenizing Christianity. However, at that time “indigenization” for these churches was not Indonesianization but sinicization, as they looked to China for inspiration. The issue of the indigenization (read: Indonesianization) of other Chinese churches into the new nation state of Indonesia post-1949 will be discussed in the next section.

### Negotiating ethnic, religious and national identities in post-colonial Indonesia

Christianity was commonly associated with modernity in post-colonial Indonesia due to its legacy of being a “Dutch” religion, which represented ties with the modern, global world (Kipp 1996; Aragon 2000; Keane 2007). As followers of this so-called “Dutch religion,” Indonesian Christians were obliged to prove that they were part of the new nation-state and that they were loyal citizens. Indeed, they had proven their citizenship and belonging convincingly. For instance, during the struggle for independence, the Christians had joined their fellow Indonesians in fighting against the Dutch. They were also active in political participation in independent Indonesia, evident in the establishment of Parkindo (Partai Kristen Indonesia, the Indonesian Christian Party) and in their rejection of the Jakarta Charter, which had a preference for *syari’ah* law (Titaley 2008). In a move toward Indonesianization of the church, indigenous church leaders took over the leadership from their Dutch counterparts after independence. Although the Constitution and the national ideology of Pancasila gave Christians equal citizenship rights, occupying the position of a minority in a Muslim majority state meant that the “authenticity” of Christians as Indonesians was often subject to question. For

instance, Kipp (2000) notes Benedict Anderson's observations in the mid-1960s that Javanese Christians were regarded as something less than Javanese.

Chinese Christians found themselves in the same predicament and were not spared from such suspicion. In fact, they were doubly marginalized in the new nation-state as they embodied an ethnic and a religious identity historically marked as "foreign." Many Chinese fell victim to various discriminatory policies implemented by the Sukarno government under the pretext of Indonesianization (read: indigenization) of the economy. Previously labeled as "Foreign Orientals" by the Dutch administration, the Chinese were still perceived to be aliens even though many of them had opted for Indonesian citizenship. In order to prove their loyalty to Indonesia, some Chinese churches made a conscious decision to assimilate and to Indonesianize, while others subtly retained their ethnic identity and carefully navigated the new political terrain.

One important Chinese church that assimilated during the 1950s was Gereja Kristen Indonesia (GKI or Indonesian Christian Church). The church today has more than 260,000 members with more than 220 congregations across Indonesia. GKI is the result of the union of three major Chinese churches (THKTKH) in West, Central and East Java in 1956 (Hartono 1999). As discussed earlier, Chinese-oriented congregations left THKTKH and formed CHCTCH in 1939. The remaining THKTKH churches were "from the beginning orientated to the Dutch East Indies and later Indonesia, and never considered mainland China as their centre" (Hartono 1999: 26). Such identity orientation accounts for why it pursued the path of assimilation. GKI became involved in nation-building when it became a member of the National Council of Churches in Indonesia (DGI, now PGI, Communion of Churches in Indonesia), which aimed to unite all churches into one Christian Church in Indonesia.

It is significant to note that Gereja Kristen Indonesia (Indonesian Christian Church) changed its name from THKTKH (Chinese Christian Church) in the 1950s after a long and complex process of deliberation. This name change signified a "change in orientation and a transformation in identity" of the church (Setiabudi 1995: 94). As the church comprised mainly *peranakan* Chinese members who had become Indonesian citizens and used Indonesian as their lingua franca, it was appropriate for the church to identify with the newly born nation. This was exemplified in the dropping of the word "Tionghoa" (Chinese) in its new name, while other ethnic churches still used ethnic names (e.g. the Batak, Sundanese, Minahasa churches). It has also been argued that GKI needed to prove their "Indonesianness" more than the other Indonesian churches of native descent, because of the requirement that Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent produce a certificate (SKBRI) to prove their citizenship while native Indonesians do not have to do so (Setiabudi 1995: 140).

Unlike other Indonesian churches such as Gereja Protestant *di* Indonesia bagian Barat (GPIB or the Protestant Church in Western Indonesia) or Gereja Pentekosta *di* Indonesia (GPdI or the Pentecostal Church in Indonesia), GKI did not adopt the preposition "*di*" (or "in") in its name. It should be noted that "the choice of GKI without '*di*' is not to be read as a statement that Indonesian Christians of Chinese descent are more Indonesian. It is to the contrary: they are

not foreign to Indonesia, even when considered as foreign by some" (Setiabudi 1995: 140). Hence, the name GKI is an emblem to show that it is an Indonesian church, not just a church in Indonesia. The change of name also brought about psychological readjustment to the church in terms of its openness to members of different ethnic origins (Hartono 1999; Kurnia and Hale 1999). For instance, while congregations of GKI in urban areas are predominantly Chinese, it is not uncommon to find non-Chinese-dominated GKI congregations in rural areas.

Shortly after Suharto took power in 1966, his so-called "New Order" government implemented a military-backed Assimilation Program to systematically suppress all expressions of Chinese identity. The Suharto administration actively promoted religious affiliation in order to prevent the re-emergence of communism. Consequently, Christianity experienced a boom during the New Order period, with mass conversion of ethnic Chinese (Nagata 2005; Andaya 2009).<sup>10</sup> Many Chinese considered the best protection against persecution was to join an officially recognized religion such as Christianity, as it did not have the stigma of being Chinese. Moreover, for the Chinese minority who were subjected to forced assimilation and oppression of their culture, Christianity offered a new identity. It has been observed that the ethnic Chinese converted to this global religion as "a purposeful strategy to turn away from the nation state in order to embrace a larger global frame of reference" (Koning 2009: 126). Koning (2009) further argues that Christianity was able to redress the suppressed expressions of Chineseness and empower the ethnic Chinese to participate in the "politics of the Lord" since they had little access to practical politics within New Order Indonesia.

However, Chinese Indonesians who converted to Christianity were still seen as "Westernized" by some members of their community. The critics rekindled the controversy of Christian conversion as an abandonment of Chineseness and Confucian values. The common assumptions were that Christians were un-Chinese and the church was an emblem of Westernization. It was commonly perceived that only Buddhist and Chinese temples had played a role in preserving Chineseness, which had always been under the threat of erasure during the New Order. This assumption may have some truth in it, as Singgih observes:

This is a strange coincidence, that many ethnic Chinese Protestants oppressed Chinese culture. To them, Chinese Christians have to replace pagan Chinese culture with Western culture, which they see as a product of Christianity. In many Chinese congregations in Indonesia, no other culture except Western culture was allowed. The situation has changed since Chinese culture was free from oppression [in 1998]. Now Chinese New Year is a national holiday, some Chinese congregations have started organizing Chinese New Year services.

(Singgih 2009: 97, my translation)

At the same time, it cannot be generalized that Chinese churches had not exercised agency in preserving Chinese identity during the New Order. While many Chinese churches changed their name into Indonesian-sounding ones in the late

1950s, not all of them followed the footsteps of GKI to assimilate. Some Chinese churches continued to retain their Chinese identity and viewed themselves as an ethnic church in Indonesia. These churches maintained their Chineseness through teaching Mandarin in Sunday school, delivering bilingual sermons in Indonesian and Mandarin, and maintaining transnational ties with Chinese churches in Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia. These churches thus imagined themselves into a transnational, global network of Chinese churches and continued to nourish and renew their Chineseness. Even so, Chinese churches usually kept a very low profile in terms of ethnic identity. Nevertheless, the ethnicity of the church could hardly be concealed due to the class visibility of the Chinese Christians, who occupy a significant segment within the entrepreneurial class of society (Kipp 1996; Andaya 2009).

The Chinese-language ministries in Chinese churches paid a heavy price for assimilation. The closing of Chinese schools, organizations, presses and media resulted in the younger generation's inability to read and speak Chinese. Consequently, congregations for Chinese or even bilingual worship services dwindled, as young people preferred to attend Indonesian services. Chinese services were mostly attended by the older generation who were nostalgic about the past. Furthermore, the lack of Mandarin-speaking talent also led to the problem of church leadership succession. It became challenging to find replacement for older generation Chinese-speaking pastors and church leaders.

The grim outlook for Chineseness began to change after the fall of Suharto in 1998. Many schools started offering Mandarin, and there has been a renewed interest in Chinese language and culture across Indonesia (Hoon 2008). The fruit of such resurgence can be seen in some Chinese churches in the form of celebration of Chinese New Year (discussed below) and the frequent presentations of Chinese songs and performances by their young members. However, it is important to emphasize that not all Chinese churches celebrate this renaissance. For example, an executive committee member of Gereja Kristen Indonesia asserts, "GKI did not participate in the euphoria of the resurgence of Chineseness because of our commitment to Indonesianization. The process to Indonesianize is continuous; there is no turning back, no resinicization" (personal communication, 15 June 2009).

### Christianity and Imlek

The contested nature of the interpretation of tradition versus religious rituals can be exemplified in the celebration of Chinese New Year, a festival regarded as pivotal for most Chinese. Chinese New Year, known as "*Imlek*" in Indonesia, is a contentious festival. The public celebration of *Imlek* was prohibited during the Suharto regime under Presidential Decree No. 14/1967, which repressed any manifestation of Chinese beliefs, customs and traditions and prohibited the public celebration of Chinese religious and cultural festivals, such as *Imlek* and the lion and dragon dance. It is obvious that this decree conflated the cultural and religious practices of *Imlek* celebration. The discriminatory regulation was annulled under President Abdurrahman Wahid's administration (1999–2001).

In 2002, President Megawati declared *Imlek* a national holiday, beginning in the year 2003. *Imlek* is unique in Indonesia, where Confucianism has become an institutionalized religion. The adherents of the Confucian religion claim *Imlek* as their sacred day to commemorate the birth of Confucius, just as Christians celebrate Christmas to remember the birth of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, most Chinese Indonesians celebrate it as a cultural and ethnic festival (Hoon 2009).

Setiabudi notes that in 1960 a *peranakan* Chinese church in Bandung prohibited the celebration of *Imlek* because they thought the celebration was redundant for Chinese Christians and regarded their "real" New Year as 1 January. Another report states that it was common to find Chinese Christians during the New Order declaring that, "we are already Christians, [so we] don't celebrate *Imlek*" (*Indonesia Media Online* 2001, my translation). However, such negative sentiments about *Imlek* changed after 1998. For instance, a Chinese Indonesian pastor claimed that in the past the church had misunderstood Chinese traditions and mistaken *Imlek* as an act of worship. He argues that "now the Christian church should take advantage of *Imlek* [as an opportunity] to spread the Gospel" (*Indonesia Media Online* 2001, my translation). Indeed, many Chinese Christian churches now celebrate *Imlek* by organizing thanksgiving worship services on the first day of Chinese New Year (cf. Chiou's chapter in this volume).

The lifting of the official prohibition on *Imlek* witnessed an explosive rise in visitors to Chinese temples to honor their ancestors during the festival. This was not limited to followers of Chinese religions. Some Chinese Christians have inconspicuously observed the traditional customs of filial piety and ancestor worship as part of their cultural heritage, despite the church's disapproval (Wijaya 2002; Hermawan 2007). For instance, David Lie, a Chinese Christian who visited a Chinese temple during *Imlek* states, "*Imlek* is part of our culture and identity; it is a chance for us to remind ourselves and our children of where we came from" (*Jakarta Post* 2009). To him, *Imlek* is a cultural celebration and does not contradict his religion as a Christian. As he further asserts, "I am a devout Christian who goes to church on Sundays. But does that deny me the right to respect my ancestors and preserve their culture? I don't think so." The church is unlikely to agree with him, as it considers Christians' participation in Chinese rituals as religious syncretism.<sup>11</sup> However, in the reality of everyday life, many non-Western Christians adopt a "survival strategy by living in two worlds at the same time: The Western world of the church, the school etc. and the world of their own culture at home" (Frederiks 2009: 9).

As discussed earlier, Chinese churches have desperately tried to differentiate the cultural and religious elements in Chinese customs and traditions. While the celebration of *Imlek* is permitted by the Chinese church as a cultural festival, paying respect to ancestors in a Chinese temple is not. The Rev. Markus Tan, an evangelical pastor in Jakarta, published a book entitled *Imlek dan Alkitab* (*Imlek and the Bible*) to challenge Chinese folk traditions observed during *Imlek* celebration and called for a return to the "tradition of God's kingdom on earth" (Tan 2008, my translation). The author was concerned that Chinese Christians would "return" to their practice of religious syncretism when celebrating *Imlek*, especially if they were to participate in Chinese rituals and practices associated

with the festival, such as the temple visit mentioned above. In the final chapter of Tan's book, he states that "those of us who have believed are new creations in Christ" (Tan 2008: 193, my translation). To be a *new* creation suggests that Chinese Christians should abandon *old* practices, namely those folk rituals practiced during *Imlek*.

The Catholics, on the other hand, are more accommodating toward such Chinese customs and traditions.<sup>12</sup> It has been suggested that "the Catholic Church recognizes cultural differences, legitimises rather than denigrates them and responds to them by creating mechanisms of accommodation or coexistence, for example by co-opting 'other' practices, symbols and rituals" (Eves 2007: 104). Furthermore, ancestral rites are still commonly practiced among Chinese Catholics in Indonesia (see Hartono 1996: 54–55; Wijaya 2002: 64).<sup>13</sup> For instance, after 1998 *Imlek* was reportedly celebrated at a Sunday mass in a Catholic church in Jakarta with performances of Chinese songs and dances. The church was decorated in the lucky color red from its carpet to its candles, including the priests' robes. In another city, Pastor William Chang of Pontianak Catholic Cathedral attempted to relate seven symbols of *Imlek* to the teaching of Jesus in his sermon during a Chinese New Year mass. The relevant "traditions" that the priest identified included the cleansing of self – symbolized by the wearing of new clothes during *Imlek*; Holy Communion – symbolized by the family feast during Chinese New Year eve; respect to elders; good deeds in the form of giving alms – symbolized by the giving of monetary gifts of *angpao*; casting out of devils – symbolized by firecrackers; salvation – symbolized by the color of the mandarin fruit; and thanksgiving (*Kompas* 2008, my translation).

In Berlian's quest to find a "meeting point" between Christianity and Chinese culture, mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, he attempts to reconcile the Chinese lunar calendar with the Western calendar and relates five Chinese traditional festivals to Christian traditions and festivals. For instance, he reconciled: (1) *Imlek* with God's creation and renewal, further arguing that the Chinese spring festival is celebrated with a spirit of renewal, and so Christians should celebrate *Imlek* with a focus on a renewal of faith and family ties; (2) Grave-Sweeping Day (*Qing Ming*) with Easter. According to him, Christians should use this day to reflect on the tradition of filial piety and be reminded of the inter-relational reconciliation between God and humans that Easter symbolizes; (3) the Dragon Boat Festival with the feast of Pentecost; (4) the Mid-autumn Festival with the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles; and (5) the Winter Solstice Festival (*Dong Zhi*) with Christmas Day. Regardless of whether the attempts of the Catholic priest and protestant pastor to reconcile Chinese festivals with Christian traditions are theologically sound, they exemplify the fact that the negotiation between *Chineseness and Christianity is a continual process that is far from completion.*

## Conclusion

This chapter has made a tentative exploration of the complex and continuous negotiations between *Chineseness and Christianity*. The discussions of the early encounters of Christianity in China exemplify that the nature of the

conflict between *Chineseness and Christianity* was primarily centered upon politics and culture. The former was related to the perceived "foreignness" of Christianity, commonly associated with an imperialist agenda and colonialism, while the latter involved a foray into the convoluted relationship between religion and culture. The introduction of Christianity along with the Western/modern concept of "religion" to China had compelled the Chinese to unpack and redefine Confucianism, customs and culture, as well as to differentiate religious rituals from secular traditions. This is best illustrated in the extensive debates between the Confucians and the Christians in both China and the Dutch East Indies.

The lack of any intrinsic difference between culture and religion in the Chinese context provoked an anxiety for a religion such as Christianity which is built on the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. This Eurocentric binary was eventually internalized by non-Western Christians, including Chinese Christians. To avoid falling into much-feared religious syncretism, Chinese Christians rejected religious symbols and rituals in Chinese culture but retained those traditions and practices that they perceive as secular. Such a task requires one's creative reinterpretation and contextualization of the subject matter and depends on who has the power to define. However, a clean break from the past is never easy, let alone neat, as many Chinese traditions and customs are intertwined with one's identity and membership in society.

The case study of Indonesia demonstrates the different positions and strategies that Chinese churches have taken in negotiating their multiple identities in different phases of Indonesian history. In order to erase the "foreignness" of Christianity, some Chinese churches severed ties with the Dutch missions; they either indigenized or sinicized their faith. By establishing an ethnic church, Chinese Christians tried to relativize *Chineseness* in a bid to separate the concept of "Chineseness" – Chinese ethnicity and culture – from Chinese religion and customs. All these were carried out with the objective of proving that Christianity is not a "Dutch religion" and that it is unnecessary to adhere to Chinese religions or Confucianism for one to be Chinese. Following Indonesia's independence, the quandary of identity for Chinese Christians underwent a major shift. The negotiation was no longer limited to *Chineseness and Christianity*; it further involved the interplay between Chinese Christianity and Indonesianness. Some Chinese churches decided to assimilate and to Indonesianize by erasing their ethnic character and opening themselves up to non-Chinese members. Others, however, had discreetly exercised their agency to retain their *Chineseness*.

The post-Suharto renaissance of Chinese identity has witnessed a move toward resinicization in some Chinese churches. The lifting of the ban on *Imlek* celebration has allowed Chinese Christians to rediscover their cultural heritage. Nonetheless, the contested nature of *Imlek* shows the need for Chinese Christians to continuously negotiate, reinterpret and contextualize their faith and culture. Far from being a destination, the phrase "by race, I am Chinese; and by grace, I am Christian" reflects an ongoing journey, a journey of discovery and balance, as one seeks to move between culture, tradition, race, and religion. The balance between the interplay of these forces remains a delicate one to strike, particularly so in the context of present-day Indonesia.

## Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, "Christianity" in this chapter refers to Protestantism.
- 2 Syncretism can be defined as "the excessive intermingling of a culture's non-Christian elements with the Christian message" (Noll 2009: 25). However, Christianity's guardedness against syncretism is ironic, as the religion has inevitably been involved in syncretism over time. For example, some of the modern celebrations of Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter are based on Christian incorporation of pagan traditions.
- 3 In the last two decades, the Catholic Church has emphasized inculturation, which Pope John Paul II described as "the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures" (cited in Koh 2006:188). Koh further defines inculturation as a dialogical process that involves the incarnation of Christian values into a specific culture, and the introduction of various cultural values and practices into the faith community, so that a more universal and faithful expression of the gospel can be achieved (Koh 2006:188). This definition is different from Roy's usage of the term, which this chapter refers to (Roy 2010).
- 4 For discussions of reconciliation between Chinese culture and Christianity in post-dynastic China, see Fallman (2008) and Goossaert and Palmer (2011).
- 5 Kuo (2005 and 2010) documents the Chinese reformer Kang Youwei's defunct plan to institutionalize Confucianism as a state religion and to establish the "Confucian Church" in China in the early twentieth century. Interestingly, these ideas were inspired by Christianity (see also note 9, below).
- 6 However, what constitutes "this-worldly asceticism" can be contested depending on denominational and theological interpretation. For instance, Andaya (2009) and Koning (2009) observe that Chinese Indonesians are attracted to Pentecostal-charismatic movements because of the prosperity theology preached in the church, which, in a nutshell, suggests that Christians should prosper in their career and business. Spending and conspicuous consumption is seen as an outward affirmation of such prosperity. However, a Chinese Indonesian Christian scholar who subscribes to the Calvinist Reformed theology argues that "this-worldly Protestant asceticism acts vigorously against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions; it restricts consumption, especially of luxuries. A good Calvinist does not aim at riches. It is the process that matters, therefore riches are merely a by-product" (Hermawan 2007: 590).
- 7 Among other reasons, Hartono notes that many Chinese in the Indies converted to Christianity for its association with the prestige and respect that Western culture commanded (1996: 45–46).
- 8 Referring to the missionary activities among the non-Chinese in the Dutch East Indies, Schröter (2011: 11) observes that Dutch missionaries were not only suspicious of the customary laws (*adat*) of the indigenous but often tried to eradicate them altogether, particularly those elements they defined as religious.
- 9 It has to be noted that the institutionalization of Confucianism into an organized religion was initiated by Kang Youwei and his disciples, who were pushing for social reform in late Qing China. They borrowed elements of Christianity to rationalize Confucianism in order to make it into a state religion. While the reform was unsuccessful in China, it found fertile ground in the Indies among the *peranakan* Chinese who founded the Tiong Hoa Hui Koan, the first Chinese organization in the Dutch Indies (see Duara 2005; Kuo 2005; Goossaert and Palmer 2011).
- 10 Suryadinata argues that "it is a public secret that since the 1965 coup, many Chinese have converted to Christianity to escape persecution. The number of Chinese Christians has increased although there is no official figure on that. Nevertheless, the overall Christian population in Indonesia has increased. For instance, the 1971 Census showed that 7.4 percent of the Indonesian people were Christians but the 2000

Census showed that the number had increased to 8.9 percent. This increase may be due to the conversion of ethnic Chinese to Christianity" (2005: 89).

- 11 It has to be noted that the fear of syncretism is not peculiar to Chinese Christians. As traditions of syncretism in Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam are found in Indonesia, many indigenous Christian churches also caution against such practices in their congregations (see Singgih 2009).
- 12 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the negotiations of identities in Indonesia's Catholic churches. Readers can refer to Boelaars (2005) for details of such negotiations.
- 13 Hartono notes the stark contrast in the attitude between Catholics and the Protestants toward Chinese culture and practices during the Dutch colonial period. He describes the approach of the Catholic Church as "flexible" (*luwes*) as it tolerated ancestral rites. In contrast, Dutch Protestant missionaries often forced Chinese converts to remove their ancestral altar and leave their traditional practices behind after they became Christians (1996: 54–55).

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