The Politics of Imlek

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In contemporary Indonesia, Imlek is much more than a cultural celebration

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Two days before Imlek (Chinese New Year), businesses in the Chinatown area in Jakarta ran out of stocks for their red lanterns and ‘Shanghai’ costumes. Imlek is a time for colourful parades featuring dances of the lion and other puppets, and performances of Chinese folk rituals on the streets and in Chinese temples. Imlek is also celebrated at Sunday mass in a Catholic church with performances of Chinese songs and dances. The church is decorated in lucky colour red from its carpet to its candles, including the priests’ robes.
Decorations and ornaments in the lucky colour red, representing Chineseness, together with Chinese cultural performances like the dragon and lion dances have become products of mass consumption in post-Suharto Indonesia. Major shopping malls decorate their interior with red lanterns and gigantic angpao, the red envelopes used for gifts of money. TV shows adopt Imlek themes, ranging from game shows where audiences dress in traditional Chinese costumes to talk shows featuring Chinese feng shui and fortune telling.

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Many assimilated Chinese-Indonesians find these new cultural expressions unfamiliar, if not foreign. But, notwithstanding their lack of knowledge about the rituals and practices carried out in the festival, they have embraced Imlek. To them, it is both an acknowledgement of their long suppressed identity and a symbol of new opportunities for freedom of expression.

A contested festival

Around the world, Chinese New Year is a cultural celebration. However, in Indonesia, Imlek has been much contested. This is partly because Confucians in Indonesia celebrate Imlek as a sacred day that commemorates the birth of Confucius, just as Christians celebrate Christmas to remember the birth of Jesus Christ.

While Confucianism is generally understood by Chinese elsewhere as a set of ethical rules or a moral philosophy, in Indonesia it has been an institutionalised religion since the beginning of the twentieth century. Under the New Order, Confucianism’s status as a religion was revoked, and expressions of Chinese ethnicity and culture outlawed. But after the fall of Suharto in 1998, the Supreme Council for the Confucian Religion in Indonesia (MATAKIN), which claims to represent up to a million Indonesians, asked that the government recognise Imlek as a national holiday. Other Chinese organisations in Jakarta welcomed this proposal, and supported it by lobbying the government.

The Confucians justified the designation of the Imlek year on the basis of Confucius’ birth year as comparable to the remembrance of Anno Domini in the Western calendar as the year of Christ, and the Muslim Hijrah calendar which calculates its year from the year Prophet Muhammad made the pilgrimage from Mecca to Medina. In order to maintain this ‘tradition’, Chinese organisations and Chinese-Indonesian cultural observers have to re-create a version of ancient Chinese history which shows that this calculation of the year of Imlek was practised in
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ancient China. They use a version of the Chinese calendar, obsolete even in China, according to which the year of Imlek is marked from the year of Confucius’ birth in 551 BC. This is one of the elements adopted by Confucians in Indonesia to legitimise Confucianism as an institutional religion. Another is their canonisation of Confucius as a Prophet, who obtained from Heaven the decree to spread the ‘gospel’ among the Chinese, along with their treatment of the Confucian texts (The Four Books and Five Classics) as a religious Holy Book.

In 2000, President Abdurrahman Wahid declared Imlek an optional national holiday. Two months later the Minister for Home Affairs abolished the 1978 Ministerial Instruction on Confucianism and in doing so restored it as Indonesia’s sixth officially-recognised religion. Since 2000, MATAKIN has organised formal annual Imlek celebrations to which national leaders, such as the President, and prominent Chinese are invited to attend. These annual celebrations hold significant meaning for the Chinese, as they are seen as a renewal of government commitment to Chinese religion and culture in Indonesia. To remind ethnic Chinese of the ‘origin’ on Imlek, organisations like MATAKIN publish articles in newspapers and magazines a few days before Imlek. Ironically, none of MAKATIN’s articles are published in Chinese, and none of the Chinese publications in Indonesia mention such ‘tradition’. The Chinese-educated ‘totok’, who maintain their Chineseness through Chinese culture and language and transnational ties with China and other Chinese overseas, appear to find such ‘tradition’ irrelevant and/or unnecessary.

Chinese-Indonesians who do not embrace Confucianism challenge the appropriateness of its status as a religion and argue that Imlek is a purely ethnic/cultural festival. In fact, ethnic Chinese Christians, Catholics and even Muslims have celebrated Imlek as an ethnic and cultural festival. They feel excluded when the Confucians claim Imlek as a religious celebration. To them, Imlek only became a Confucianist festival due to strategic need in order to be recognised as an official holiday, like other religious holidays; not because it is historically a religious holiday.

Quandaries around identity

The politics of Imlek do not stop at the debate about whether it is a religious or cultural festival. As Imlek has become increasingly commercialised, some argue that the cultural symbols for Imlek have become part of popular culture, learned and performed not only by Chinese Indonesians, but also Indonesians of other ethnic backgrounds. Other ethnic Chinese have strategically appropriated these symbols, aggressively commodifying them in order to demonstrate government recognition of Chinese identity and equal status.

However, the increased visibility of Chinese cultural products – and the consumption of them
by non-Chinese Indonesians – should not be naïvely read as heralding a new acceptance of the ethnic Chinese. The New Order’s assimilationist rhetoric still has a strong influence in Indonesia. New Order ideologues constructed a singular identity, which meant that the more Chinese a person was, the less Indonesian he/she became, and vice versa. The re-emergence of symbols of Chineseness could be interpreted as a return to an essentialist notion of Chineseness, substantiating the popular myth, ‘once a Chinese, always a Chinese’. Politically, this may mean that Chinese-Indonesians’ loyalty is increasingly questionable as they have now become ‘more Chinese’ and thus ‘less Indonesian’. Meanwhile, pressing issues faced by the Chinese are still left largely unattended.

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As a result, some Chinese-Indonesians are justifiably cautious about the exuberant celebration of Imlek. For instance, in early 2004 a prominent Catholic Chinese, Harry Tjan Silalahi, was quoted expressing his concern that the celebration of Imlek might have gone ‘over the limit’, as it could ‘disturb’ the feelings of Indonesians living in poverty. Underlying this concern is a fear that anti-Chinese sentiment or worse may be triggered as a result of social jealousy. Anti-Chinese sentiment is alive and well in Indonesia, and easily set off by a range of issues. This is exemplified in the case of Imlek in Pontianak.

The Chinese are the third largest ethnic group in Pontianak, after the Dayak and Malays. But the Imlek celebration there in 2008 was low-profile. Two days before Imlek the mayor of Pontianak issued Decision No.12/2008, which prohibited the display of fireworks and public performances of dragon and lion dances during the festival. The decision was made in response to the demands of the United Malay Front Movement (Gerakan Barisan Melayu Bersatu), which had taken a hardline anti-Chinese stance, calling for a ban on Chinese language and characters in public places, and rallied for Malay nationalism. The leader of the Movement, Erwan Irawan, believes that lion and dragon dance performances should not be allowed anywhere in Pontianak because they are not part of the ‘Indonesian culture’. This incident again shows the narrowly defined notion of ‘Indonesianness’ and the continuing vulnerability of Chinese-Indonesians.

Silalahi’s statement regarding the celebration of Imlek as ‘over the limit’ raises questions about the ‘limit’ for the expression of Chineseness. Where is the limit? Who decides where the limit is? Should the government dictate or draw the line to set a limit for cultural expression? Or should the Chinese-Indonesians themselves exercise discretion? These questions are not exclusively for the Chinese-Indonesians to answer, but they epitomise the problems that need to be addressed.
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