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Legacy of Zheng He's Voyages: 
The Inclusive Nature of Chinese-Indonesian Muslims 
Since 2003

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ABSTRACT
From 1405 to 1433, imperial court of the Ming Dynasty in China had launched a series of voyages sailed to 
Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa under the command of Muslim Admiral Zheng He to demonstrate 
the emperor's greatness. In the Indonesian Archipelago, the imperial fleet had significantly promoted the 
propagation of Islam. Based on this historical context, this paper argues Zheng He's voyages formed the 
inclusive nature of Chinese-Indonesian Muslim community and this nature has contributed significantly for 
Chinese-Indonesian Muslims to obtain greater societal representation since 2003. This argument will be 
substantiated through investigating the Chinese-style mosques in Indonesia, especially the Muhammad 
Cheng Hoo Mosque in Surabaya — a prominent legacy of Zheng He's voyages, with an emphasis on the 
mosques' architectural style and the societal activities they have been undertaking.

KEYWORDS
Chinese-Indonesian Muslims, Inclusive Nature, Societal Representation, Zhenghe, Muhammad 
Cheng Hoo Mosque

ABSTRAK
Dari 1405 hingga 1433, kekaisaran dinasti Ming di China mengadakan beberapa pelayaran ke Asia 
Tenggara, Asia Selatan, dan Afrika di bawah komando laksamana muslim Zheng He dalam rangka 
menunjukkan keagungan dinasti. Berdasarkan konteks sejarah tersebut, essay ini berargumen bahwa 
pelayaran Zheng He menciptakan hubungan inklusif antara masyarakat muslim Tionghoa-komunitas 
Muslim Indonesia dan relasi inklusif tersebut berperan secara signifikan bagi Muslim Tionghoa-indonesia 
untuk mendapatkan representasi sosial yang lebih besar sejak 2003. Argumen ini akan diperkuat dengan 
investigasi terhadap bangunan mesjid bergaya tionghoa di Indonesia, terutama yang ada pada mesjid 
Muhammad Chengho di Surabaya — sebuah warisan terkenal dari pelayaran Zheng He, dengan 
penekanan pada gaya arsitektur mesjid dan aktivitas sosial yang terjadi di sana.

KATA KUNCI
Muslim Tionghoa-Indonesia, Relasi Inklusif, Representasi Sosial, Zheng He, Mesjid Muhammad 
Chengho

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic minority in Indonesia has long been plagued by exclusion. In the presidential election in 2014, one black campaign against current President Joko Widodo was the deliberate spread of the rumour that he was a “Christian” and an “ethnic Chinese." Underlying issue here is not only about who actually created that rumour, probably his rivals, but also why being a Christian and an ethnic Chinese problematic for the Indonesian politician runs for president. Ethnic exclusion at both the state and public levels is explicitly one of the key answers. Toward against exclusion, ethnic minorities have divergent responses on a case by case basis. Military insurgency against the ruling regime is one common option, as the Acholi had done in Uganda, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Maya in Mexico and the Albanians in Yugoslavia. However, it is contradictory with the way that Chinese-Indonesians, focusing on cooperation and peaceful solution, have been pursuing for a long time. Chinese-Indonesian Muslims have also followed the same doctrine. One of the most important steps for their emergence as a visible social group in the Indonesian Archipelago can be traced back to the reign of the Emperor Yongle of Ming China from 1402 to 1424 until the reign of the Emperor Xuande from 1425 to 1435. From 1405 to 1433, a Ming imperial fleet of more than three hundred ships under the command of Muslim Admiral Zheng He(also known as Cheng Ho)sailed to Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa seven times. In both direct and indirect ways, its voyages had significantly promoted the spread of Islam in the archipelago. Based on this historical context, this paper argues the voyages formed the inclusive nature of Chinese-Indonesian Muslim community and this inclusiveness has contributed significantly for them to obtain greater societal representation since 2003. This argument will be substantiated through investigating the Chinese-style mosques in Indonesia, especially the Muhammad Cheng Hoo Mosque in Surabaya — a prominent legacy of Zheng He’s voyages, with an emphasis on the mosques’ architectural style and the societal activities they have been undertaking.

2. DEMOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Why a group of individuals would be considered as an ‘ethnic minority.’ Based on the explanation offered in 1977 by Francesco Capotorti, the United Nations (UN) special rapporteur on the minority topic, a minority is “a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members — being nationals of the State — possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language." This explanation is debatable. In most countries, an ethnic minority group will be referred to as a numerical minority, but in South Africa for instance, African population is in a non-dominant position under the apartheid regime, although they are the majority in the demographic point of view. In other words, being numerically small in a state does not necessarily indicate an ethnic group is a minority, but in most cases, it is no doubt one key reason for them to be in a ‘non-dominant position’ in general.

The minority position of Chinese-Indonesians has been based on the same logic. In 2000, they were accounted for only 1.50 percent of all Indonesians. However, this figure is to some degree problematic. Only eleven out of the thirty provinces had reported their figures on Chinese-Indonesians in the census. The actual turnout from those eleven provinces was 0.86 percent. 1.50 percent is an arguably close result

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2 Editorial: are we all bigots? June 18 2014, The Jakarta Post.
5 Leo Suryadinata, Evi Nurfidy Arief In and Aris Ananta, 2003, Indonesia’s Population: Ethnicity and Religion in a Changing Political Landscape (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), XXIII.
came out from the subsequent estimation by Leo Suryadinata, Evi Nurvidya Arifin and Aris Ananta.\(^8\) The actual percentage that would include data from all provinces according to them should fall within the range from 1.45 to 2.04 percent.\(^9\) In addition, adopting self-identification as the census’s survey method is also considered as problematic. As the memory of the 1998 anti-Chinese violence had far from been elapsed, it was not uncommon for many Indonesians to omit their Chinese ancestry.\(^10\) It would be uncomfortable for them to be viewed “ethnically” by the indigenous or prabumi community. Even so, the underestimation in 2000 is not sufficient to reverse the fact that Chinese-Indonesians have been a non-dominant position in terms of population, especially when ethnic distinction was still officially recognized, this position had also been openly confirmed in other fields, such as politics and culture, in the whole country. The proportion of the population has not experienced visible growth in the next decade. The 2010 census is the latest and most comprehensive census that has surveyed on ethnic information. In 2006, enactment of the Law no. 12/2006 has removed the official distinction between the indigenous and non-indigenous Indonesians.\(^11\) In the societal aspect, even though the distinction set up by the prabumi public is still entrenched as the case of Jokowi has demonstrated, ethnic minority including Chinese-Indonesians have actually obtained greater room and confidence to openly express their identity. But, ironically, according to the 2010 census their population proportion experienced a decrease. Only 1.20 percent of all Indonesians identified themselves had Chinese ancestry.\(^12\) Their status of being a minority group is also reflected in their religious belief. In 2000, 88.22 percent of all Indonesians were Muslims.\(^13\) In the contrary, in Chinese-Indonesian community, that percentage was only 5.41 percent, whilst the remaining 53.82 percent were Buddhists and 35.09 percent were Christians, including Protestants and Catholics.\(^14\) In 2010, Muslims were 87.54 percent of all Indonesians, but only 4.65 percent of the Chinese-Indonesian community, in which 49.06 and 43.80 percent were Buddhists and Christians, respectively.\(^15\) Chinese-Indonesian Muslims therefore have been in a ‘dual-minority’ status. By being Chinese ethnically, they are the minority to the prabumi population. By adhering to the Islamic faith, they are also the minority in their own ethnic community. In both communities, societal representation would be a significant concern for Chinese-Indonesian Muslims and both aspects will be discussed in this paper. It should be noted that societal representation in this paper refers more to societal and cultural recognition, rather than to recognition in practical politics.

3. HISTORICAL LEGACY OF ZHENG HE’S VOYAGES

Islam was firstly brought to insular Southeast Asia by Arab and Indian Muslim traders during the eleventh century then spread initially till the fourteenth century.\(^16\) In the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, its propagation was instigation.\(^17\) Traders—agent of propagating Islam, mostly headed to China rather than insular Southeast Asia and stayed there for generations. This was firstly because China during Yuan (1271–1368) and Ming (1368–1644). Dynasties had a more open environment for Muslims and Islam.\(^18\) In addition, imperial China was a huge, booming market with a relatively pro-foreign trade imperial court and politically and societally stable environment.\(^19\) All these factors were favourable for Muslim trade. Until the fifteenth century, the propagation of Islam was eventually revived with Zheng He’s voyages.

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\(^8\) Suryadinata, Arifin and Ananta, 101.
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Ibid., 75.
\(^11\) Ananta, Arifin and Bakhtiari, 18.
\(^13\) Ananta, Arifin and Bakhtiari, 30.
\(^14\) Ibid.
\(^15\) Ananta et al., 21.
\(^16\) Tan Ta Sen, 2009, Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), 153.
\(^18\) Tan, Cheng Ho and Islam, 168–9.
\(^19\) Ibid.
Among scholars, there are two distinct voices regarding the major objectives of the voyages. Scholars such as Tan Ta Sen argue the positive aspects, including to promote foreign trade and cultural exchange and to carry out peace-keeping functions. Others such as Geoffrey Wade perceive the voyages as an expansionist and colonialist expedition. His evidence is drawn from the fact that Zheng He's fleet had obvious military components. Most ships in the fleet were actually warships and carried a large number of military personnel. Furthermore, the fleet had also been actively involved in several "military actions", as Wade called them. One commonality between these two divergent voices is that neither considers the propagation of Islam as the official and major goal of the voyages. This idea has also been proved by the fact that in traditional Chinese chronicles there were no records on the activities of Zheng He or his crew members in spreading Islam, as noticed by Leo Suryadinata.

However, being not included by official historical records does not negate the actual happening of the propagation. In fact, it was reasonable to not include these activities in imperial documents. Ming Emperor Yongle who was a usurper, one of his political motives to launch the overseas voyages was to restore and consolidate the legitimacy of his throne. Since Confucian doctrines were the orthodox ideological system domestically and theoretically to construct and strengthen the Sinocentric tributary system and international order, the voyages were planned to be a Confucian mission since the very beginning. On the other hand, numbers of evidences can demonstrate that the imperial court was sending an "unstated implicit message," as Tan called it, that was to propagate Islam in the voyages. One of them was related to why the court sent Zheng He, a Muslim, to lead the fleet and why the fleet consisted of a large number of Muslim crew members. The answer could be for instance because the Muslims in that era were more skillful and knowledgeable in navigation. However, there are not sufficient evidences to support this assumption. For Wade, even though his opinion is not as optimistic as Tan's, he also recognizes the propagation as the direct result of the voyages. Scholars such as Mangaradjap Onggang Parlininggan, Slamet muljana and Lee Khoon Choy, however, even go so far as to claim that Zheng He brought Islam to Southeast Asia and their argument is primarily derived from the Malay Annals of Semarang and Cirebon. One example included in the Malay Annals happened in 1430.

Admiral Haji Sam Po Bo himself occupied the district of Tu Ma Panin East Java and presented this district to Raja Su King Ta. Gan Eng Wan, Haji Gan Eng Cu's brother, became Governor of Tu Ma Pan, under the suzerainty of the Majapahit ruler. He was the first Regent in the Majapahit kingdom who professed Islam.

Successfully promoting the conversion of the local ruling class is a sound evidence, but the Malay Annals' reliability as an objective historical document is still questionable. It is because it was derived from the local Chinese accounts in Java, it may contain certain myths and legends, since their producers, those
ethnic Chinese in a foreign land could be overwhelmed by the adoration and admiration toward Zheng He. As both Anthony Reid and Wade agree that "more systematic work needs to be done, however, before it [the Malay Annals] can be accepted as a credible source for the fifteenth century." Even so, through the discussion above about scholars' ideas about the relation between Zheng He's voyages and the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, it is explicit that the major disputès focused on Zheng He and his voyages had propagated Islam to what extent, rather than whether they had spread Islam or not. In other words, it has been a consensus among scholars that Zheng He and his voyages had made visible contributions to the spread of Islam throughout Southeast Asia.

One noticeable legacy of the propagation is the Chinese-style mosques. Before the voyages, Zheng He had accumulated sufficient knowledge and experience in construction of temples and mosques back in China. He had led the reconstruction of the Opaque Pagoda of the Buddhist Da Baoan Temple in Nanjing, the renovation of the Jingqiu Mosque in Nanjing, the Qingjing Mosque in Xian and the Mazu Temple in Quanzhou. In Java, according to the Malay Annals, merely from 1411 to 1416 he had built mosques for the ethnic Chinese Muslim communities in Ancol (Jakarta), Sembung (Cerbon), Lasem, Tuban, Tsethun (Gresik), Jioctung (Joratan), Canigi (Majakarta), etc. Chinese architectural features were duplicated in their design which made them distinct from the local traditional architecture. In Java for instance, mosques that are known to be built during the fifteenth century share a similar architectural structure. Their skeleton consists of two basic parts. The upper part is a pagoda-like roof. On its ridges, there are decorations of reliefs, sculptures and other artistic works. The lower part is supported by four major pillars and its eaves are also supported by some smaller pillars. Most of the roofs are multi-tiered, distinct from the single-tiered roof of the traditional Javanese architecture. As noticed by Tan, two three-tiered roofs were the prominent design for stately and palatial architecture in imperial China. In fact, it would be too conjectural to come to the conclusion that all mosques in the archipelago in the fifteenth century were built by Zheng He and his crew members, but their influences should be recognized. More importantly, existence of the Chinese-style mosques has proved that Islam and 'Chineseess' are compatible and inclusiveness is the nature of Chinese-Indonesian Muslim community which have been comfortable in coexisting with diversity in societal, cultural aspects as well as other fields.

4. MUHAMMAD CHENG HOO MOSQUE

Centuries later, open of the Muhammad Cheng Hoo Mosque in Surabaya in 2003 by the Chinese Muslim Association of Indonesia (Persatuan Islam Tionghoa Indonesia, PITI) reminded people that the compatible relation between Islam and Chinese identity had not been terminated with the end of Zheng He's voyages. Compared to its predecessors, the new mosque has absorbed more Chinese elements in its architectural style—not only the structural skeleton, but also the colour. Its major colours are red, yellow and green. In Chinese tradition, the first two colours contain special meanings—red is the traditional colour represents the Chinese nation, and yellow represents 'dignity' and 'fortune'. Green is the traditional colour of Islam. Harmonious coexistence of these three colours in one manifestation also indicates the inclusive nature of Chinese-Indonesian Muslim community.

Not only the architectural style, but also the societal activities that the Cheng Hoo Mosque has been undertaking demonstrate this inclusiveness. Dates back to the ancient time, a mosque was already more
than just a religious site. Briefly summarized by Liao Dake, a mosque had been the place for Muslims to socialize, practice religious rituals, and celebrate religious holidays. It was not just an architecture. It was also the ‘imagined community’ that gathered the Muslims from diverse backgrounds under one common name. Today, its function becomes broader. In the case of the Cheng Hoo Mosque, it has been playing an active role in charity activities through mobilizing Chinese-Indonesian Muslims and cooperating with other Chinese-Indonesian and Muslim organizations. Jos Soetomo, a Chinese-Indonesian Muslim and chairman of the Indonesian Foundation of Haji Muhammad Cheng Hoo—organizing committee of the Cheng Hoo Mosque, emphasized in 2007 in a national meeting of Indonesian Muslims that all Muslims were brothers, the wealthier brothers should offer helps to the poorer. The spirit of charity has been entrenched in the community spirit of Chinese-Indonesian Muslims and the Muslim brotherhood is one of its manifestations. According to Jiang Zhenpeng, Chinese-Indonesian Muslims’ charity activities are mainly in two categories. First is some regular and general helps, such as providing free clinic, medicines and living goods for poor Muslims. Second is to be actively involved in disaster-relief activities and post-disaster reconstruction. Assistance offered in this category are flexible and various, including material supports such as donation, and if necessary house’s construction, etc. As Komunitas, a media publication of PITI, states [Chinese-Indonesian Muslims] are everywhere in the disaster-relief activities, on the streets, in hospitals, schools and mosques, these are one of their contributions to their country and society. For Chinese-Indonesian Muslims, by adhering to their commitment to undertaking charity responsibility is one way to disprove the stereotype of their ethnic community that they are selfish ‘economic animals’ who only care about making profits.

Stereotyping is a common phenomenon in a multi-ethnic society, being similar with the pribumi public to Chinese-Indonesians, the later have also stereotyped Muslims, who they consider ‘not to be trusted, dirty, fond of having many wives and divorcing them, anti-Chinese, etc.’ For some Chinese-Indonesians, conversion to Islam is a “finishing touch of assimilation” into the so-called mainstream society. To some degrees, this stereotype would be relatively acceptable for some Chinese-Indonesians if it is added to the group of individuals who do not share visible commonalities with them, because they are ‘others’, not ‘us’. That is to say, their attitude toward the Muslims in their own ethnic community could be more complex and to some extents contradictory, since these Muslims could be both ‘others’ and ‘us’, or belong to neither of these categories. Some improvements in this situation should be credited to the Cheng Hoo Mosque, due to its persistent efforts to enhance Chinese-Indonesian's understanding of Islam and Muslims. As noticed by Akh Muzakki, the mosque has become one of the most preferred places for Chinese-Indonesians who have other religious beliefs and would convert to Islam, to perform their ceremony of conversion. Also, in Surabaya, enthusiasm among Chinese-Indonesians to convert to Islam has been gradually stimulated, partly because of the impressive presence of the Cheng Hoo Mosque in that city, as Muzakki observes.

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37 Idem [Role as a bridge: Jos Soetomo's talk on the national meeting of Indonesian Muslims, November 6 2007, International Daily News].
38 Jiang Zhenpeng, 2013, 印尼华人穆斯林社团初探 [Indonesian Chinese Muslim associations in an era of democratic reform], 华侨华人历史研究 [Overseas Chinese History Studies], 4, 38.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
5. CONCLUSION

Influence of Zheng He's voyages has never faded completely in the Indonesian Archipelago. From 1405 to 1433, the voyages had propagated Islam and formed the inclusive nature of Chinese-Indonesian Muslims.

This inclusiveness has been reflected on the Chinese-style mosques, especially on their architectural style since the fifteenth century. Today, one of the most prominent mosques should be the Cheng Hoo Mosque in Surabaya. Its architectural style and the societal activities it has been undertaking explicitly reflect the inclusive nature. By investigating these two aspects, this paper has proved the fact that the inclusiveness has significantly contributed for Chinese-Indonesian Muslims in pursuing greater societal representation in their dual-minority status. In societal activities, by dedicating to charity works Chinese-Indonesian Muslims have paved the way for their ethnic community to disprove the pribumi stereotype of Chinese-Indonesians as selfish business people who only focus on making profits. Withgradual propagation of Islam, Chinese-Indonesian Muslims are able to enhance understanding of Islam and acceptance of Muslims in their own ethnic community.

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