

From Vihara To Klenteng, And To National Hero's Monument?:

The Changing Status Of Chinese Temples And The Struggles Of Ethnic-Chinese In Rembang

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During Soeharto's era, Ethnic-Chinese in Indonesia had generally experienced severe discrimination and oppression. Not only had they politically castrated, but their cultural manifestation had been strictly prohibited. The aim of New Order government was, in short, to make Ethnic-Chinese inconspicuous and invisible among other native ethnic groups (*Pribumi*). This principle was clearly embodied in Assimilation Policy, in which Ethnic-Chinese were demanded to remove their "Chineseness (*Kecinaan*)" and to be absorbed totally into the body of "Indonesian Nation (*Bangsa Indonesia*)".

To be concrete, it was *Inpres No.14 1967* that became the basis for this policy. According to this presidential instruction, all belief and tradition of Chinese origin would not be allowed to be shown off in public, on the ground that the display of them would cause unnatural psychological, mental and moral effects against Indonesian people¹. From this primary law, for example, there appeared another important law issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, i.e. *Inmendagri No.455.2-360 1988*. This instruction defined Chinese Temples or *Klenteng* as worshipping facilities based on Chinese traditional belief and custom, then prescribed that *Klenteng* as such should not be repaired nor extended any more, and that they should not use

¹ See Instruksi Presiden Republik Indonesia Nomor: 14 Tahun 1967 tentang Agama, Kepercayaan dan Adat istiadat Cina.



as their names any terms usually arranged for Buddhists' religious facilities such as “*Vihara*”, “*Cattya*” or “*Sanggar*”².

By the way, no wonder under this regulative Assimilation Policy, studies on Ethnic-Chinese were also stagnated. After the last monographic studies on the communities of this ethnic minority group in Java in 1950s³, interests of scholars were generally centered on the “Assimilist / Integralist” dispute held by Chinese intellectuals on the eve of G30S⁴. In 1980s, the dominance of this minority group over the national economy, especially the rapid growth of Chinese conglomerates, began to be featured as a hot research topic⁵. And as if to keep step with these rather partial views in academic circles, the general understanding of Ethnic-Chinese also tended to be narrowed down into a fixed idea, i.e. economy-oriented, unpatriotic, never-to-be-assimilated group⁶.

Meanwhile, lives and identities of Chinese, especially those of non-elite, non-capitalist who lives in rural area have seldom been touched until recently.

Thus in this paper, as a case study, I would like to spotlight the Chinese community of a rural town in Central Java; Rembang. By reviewing chronologically the process of changing status of Chinese temples there, we can see a good example of how “Chinese-ness” emerged and how it was negotiated.

Location and basic information about the field

The small provincial capital town Rembang is located on the northeast corner of Central Jawa Province⁷. According to the national census in 2000, those who were categorized as “*WNI (Cina)*” accounted 1.80% of the total population in *Kecamatan Rembang* (see **Table 1**). If we look more closely, most of *WNI (Cina)* still concentrate in the former Chinese residential area,

² See Instruksi Menteri Dalam Negeri Nomor: 455.2-360 Tahun 1988 tentang Penataan Klenteng. For general analysis of the anti-Chinese policy of Orde Baru, see [Suryomenggolo, 2003].

³ See [Tan, 1963], [Willmott, 1960].

⁴ See [Suryadinata, 1979] for example.

⁵ See [Handoko (et. al), 1996] and [Mackie, 1991] for example.

⁶ See [Naberont, 2002]. Recently, several critical notions against these biased views have appeared. See articles in Wibowo (ed.) [1999 & 2001].

⁷ Author executed field work in Rembang from October 2002 to March 2004 under the auspice of LIPI and Pusat Studi Kebudayaan dan Perubahan Sosial, UGM.



which was fixed by Dutch colonial government in the 19th century. It is now estimated that there are about 200 households of Ethnic-Chinese in this small area⁸.

Table 1. Population of Ethnic-Chinese in Rembang

<i>Kab. Rembang</i>	Total Population	557,781
	WNI (Cina)	3,037 (0.05%)
<i>Kec. Rembang</i>	Total Population	76,965
	WNI (Cina)	1,382 (1.80%)
<i>Ex-Pecinan (4 desa)</i>	Total Population	17,608
	WNI (Cina)	1,288 (7.31%)

At the north and south ends of this Chinese residential area, there lie two old Chinese temples, namely *Tjoe Hwie Kiong* and *Hok Tik Bio*. The northern one facing Java Sea is *Tjoe Hwie Kiong*. This larger temple was built in 1841, and has marine goddess *Makco* or *Thian Siang Sing Bo* (*Tian Shang Shen Mu*) as the main adored object. Besides this guardian goddess of sailors, now 5 other statues of gods are worshiped together in this building.

The other temple is *Hok Tik Bio*, located on the southern hill. As is clear from its name, the host god of this smaller temple is *Hok Tik Cing Sien* (*Fu De Zheng Shen*), the god of earth and wealth. This newer temple (rebuilt in 1885) now has 2 other gods and 1 altar for ancestors within the same place.

Traditional managerial system of Chinese temples

Formerly, the Chinese residential area of this small town was divided into two sub-areas; the north and the south. While the inhabitants of the northern seaside sub-area took all responsibility for preparation and execution of rituals held in *Tjoe Hwie Kiong*, those living in the southern hillside sub-area were to take care of all events held in *Hok Tik Bio*. For the rituals to be carried out practically, both temples had *Locu* (lit. an incense pot keeper) as their ritual managers. Each temple's *Locu* was elected annually among the members of each sub-area, and one who was honorably appointed as *Locu* would bear all expense for offerings and

⁸ These data are shown in the reports of the national census 2000, i.e. *Kabupaten Rembang Tahun 2002* and *Karakteristik Penduduk Kecamatan Rembang*.



would manage the rituals by himself during his one-year-term. Understandably, smooth carrying out of the rituals would raise *Locu*'s fame and prestige.

Such management system had been maintained for a while in spite of the increasing pressure against "Chinese Culture" since the beginning of Soeharto's regime. But in early 1970s, no one would dare to become a candidate for *Locu* of *Tjoe Hwie Kiong*, because they felt too heavy to bear all expenditures required for this prestigious post, that is to say, plenty of offering for 5 altars of gods enshrined in this large temple⁹.

Facing this administrative crisis, in 1973 people in the northern sub-area founded a provisional steering committee (*Panitia*) for *Tjoe Hwie Kiong* to lighten the burden on its *Locu*. At this stage, people in the southern sub-area felt no need to give up their traditional managerial system, since only 2 altars were placed in *Hok Tik Bio* then, so it was not so burdensome for them to be elected as *Locu*¹⁰.

The founding of *Yayasan Metta Bhumi* and Buddhization of Chinese temples

The leading person of founding this *Panitia* was a certain Irwan, who was born in Rembang in 1943, and had great influence in this small town as a leader of Mahayana Buddhist sect, and as a man with paranormal second sight.

In 1975, by instrumentality of him, with the aim of stabilizing the management of *Tjoe Hwie Kiong*, this tentative committee was expanded into a permanent organization, which was named *Yayasan Metta Bhumi*.

3 years later, the southern temple *Hok Tik Bio* also joined the new-born organization, in hope that the refreshment of the managerial system would breathe new life to the temple. In this way, the administration of two Chinese temples in Rembang was unified under the sole managerial organization *Yayasan Metta Bhumi* in late 70s.

⁹ The gods enshrined in *Tjoe Hwie Kiong* in early 70s were *Thian Siang Sing Bo*, *Tong Thian Goan Swee*, *Kong Tik Cun Ong*, *Hok Tik Cing Sien*, *Tan Oey Djie Sian Sheng*.

¹⁰ Until late 70s, *Hok tik Bio* had only one god (*Hok Tik Cing Sien*) enshrined in it, besides an altar for ancestors.



What was more important, under the strong initiative of the above-mentioned founding leader, Irwan, this organization itself was oriented to become a Buddhist organization, to be exact, Mahayana Buddhist organization. And in this process, the status of two worship facilities was changed from “Chinese temple (*Klenteng*)” into “Buddhist temple (*Vihara*)”.

Needless to say, most of Chinese in Rembang had sensed unfavorable atmosphere in the middle of the suppressive policy against “Chinese culture” throughout 70-80s, so that they felt no reluctance in the Buddhization of Chinese temples. Rather, they even followed this process in hope that under the aegis of one of the officially legitimized religions, they would be able to keep the stable position of their temples. *Tjoe Hwie Kiong* and *Hok Tik Bio* thus were registered by Department of Religious Affairs as authentic Buddhist temples with the names of *Vihara Dana Maitri* and *Vihara Amorva Bhumi* respectively.

Tabel 2. List of additional objects in *Tjoe Hwie Kiong* and *Hok Tik Bio*

	<i>Tjoe Hwie Kiong</i>	<i>Hok Tik Bio</i>
early 1970s	An incense pot for <i>Thian Kong</i> was added.	---
1973	<i>Panitia</i> were founded.	---
1975	<i>Yayasan Metta Bhumi</i> was organized. Statues of <i>Kwan Im Posat</i> and 3 <i>Buddhas</i> were added.	---
1978	---	Joined in <i>Yayasan Metta Bhumi</i> . An incense pot for <i>Thian Kong</i> was added.
1981	---	Statues of <i>Kwan Im Posat</i> and <i>Kwan Seng Tee Kung</i> were added.

Naturally, as respectable Buddhist temples, these two facilities needed to be provided with proper “Buddhism-ness”, and then several statues such as *Shakyamuni* and *Kwan Im Posat* were added to each temple (see **Table 2**).

In the mean time, partly because of the prohibition by law on displaying “Chinese culture” in public, all the panels with Chinese characters hung in the temples were totally removed, and all the traditional festive ceremonies of Chinese origin were held inside the yards of temples so as not to be too conspicuous. In a word, under the direction of the new administrative



organization *Yayasan Metta Bhumi*, Buddhism elements of *Tjoe Hwie Kiong* and *Hok Tik Bio* were emphasized on the one hand, and their Chinese elements were restrained on the other.

Problems caused by Buddhization process

For some years, owing to the innovation of the organization, management of both temples was activated. But in the course of time, several problems began to come to the surface.

According to a number of informants, the greatest problem was the autocratic and arbitrary way of administration by the founding leader, Irwan. He is even said to have forbidden using the yards of these holy temples as places for chatting or playing.

What was more important, following the extreme Buddhization, most of Catholic-Chinese who used to haunt these temples began to be reluctant to visit them. Usually, while Catholic-Chinese think that their *Agama* (religion) is no doubt Catholic, but they also don't hesitate to put incense sticks in front of statues in Chinese temples, or to serve ancestor's altars with Chinese-style offerings, since they presume that such deeds belong to a realm of *Kepercayaan* (lit. belief) or *Kebudayaan* (culture) instead of that of *Agama*. But now that both *Tjoe Hwie Kiong* and *Hok Tik Bio* were declared as Buddhist temples, so those who embraced Catholicism would no longer be disposed to visit these facilities.

By the way, since 1980s, this administrative organization *Yayasan Metta Bhumi* had had a Chinese broker in Semarang (the capital city of Central Jawa Province) preside as a protector of both temples. This person was said to have tight connection with the then President Soeharto, and through this connection he kept great influence over bureaucracy in this wide area and acted as a patron of Chinese communities there.

Rembang people, facing several problems mentioned above, then complained about Irwan's way of management to this influential broker. And after having been given informal consent by him, they finally succeeded in dismissing *Irwan* from the top director of the organization in a manner of coup d'etat in 1994.

“Klenteng is Klenteng”

In this way the leader of the temples in Rembang was changed for the first time since the foundation of *Yayasan Metta Bhumi*. But soon after this incident, this management organization received a letter from The Office of Social & Political Affairs (*Kantor Sospol* : a



local sub-unit of The Department of Home Affairs). This letter pointed out that both *Tjoe Hwie Kiong* and *Hok Tik Bio* were in illegal state since they were using as their titles “*Vihara*”, which should only be used for pure Buddhist temples, and demanded that these two facilities should be improved properly as *Vihara* at once. Needless to say, the law referred to in this letter was the above-mentioned *Inmendagri No.455.2-360 1988*, which banned *Klenteng* to assume titles for Buddhist temples such as *Vihara*.

To tell the truth, both of temples in Rembang had been certified as Buddhist temples by the Department of Religious Affairs before this *Inmendagri* was enacted, so actually the indication of *Kantor Sospol* was irrelevant. Yet Chinese in this small town had been fed up with the radical Buddhization process led by ex-director Irwan. At the same time, they also felt shocked at the fact that however hard they might try to restrain Chinese-ness of their temples under the umbrella of official religion Buddhism, they would after all be regarded and receive political interference as “*Cina*”, on the other. In view of this situation, Chinese in Rembang came to think that it would be still better to change the status of both temples from *Vihara* back to *Klenteng*. In short, they thought that it was mistake to have tried to camouflage their temples as *Vihara*, and insisted that after all “*Klenteng is Klenteng*”.

With this English slogan “*Klenteng is Klenteng*”, the new boarding members of *Yayasan Metta Bhumi* opened up the process of re-changing the status of *Tjoe Hwie Kiong* and *Hok Tik Bio* from *Vihara* back to *Klenteng*.

In April 1995, they held the general meeting of *Yayasan Metta Bhumi* to which 108 members were attendant. In this meeting, they agreed to dissolve the Buddhist temples’ organization *Yayasan Metta Bhumi*, and then to found a new managerial organization for two *Klenteng* instead, which was named *Yayasan Dwi Kumala*.

Struggle for re-changing the status of temples back to *Klenteng*¹¹

However, to change the status from *Vihara* to *Klenteng* was not an easy task at all. For, as I indicated above, there exists a great divide between *Agama* and *Kepercayaan* in Indonesia. While the former is regarded as transcendental or universal, the latter is related to an individual, traditional or cultural realm, and is conceptually totally different (usually lower)

¹¹ For the process of this status change issue of the temples in Rembang, see *Rangkaian Kronologis*.



from the former; Agama. Besides the problem of this dichotomy, “Chineseness” itself, which was inseparably connected with Klenteng, was a taboo in Orde Baru. So naturally enough, it was not easily admitted to change the status of the temples from facilities of Agama; Vihara, to those of Kepercayaan Cina; Klenteng.

In spite of these hurdles, Rembang Chinese undertook the process of re-changing the status of two temples in their town with the full support of the broker in Semarang. To carry out this process, they instrumentally paraphrased the very law taken up by Kantor Sospol. That is to say, they insisted that although Tjoe Hwie Kiong and Hok Tik Bio were assuming the title Vihara, both of them were inappropriate as Buddhist temples, so that their status should be returned to Klenteng.

As I mentioned at the beginning, this Inmendagri was enacted with the intention of making an end of the existing Klenteng in the near future, thus the status-recovery of Klenteng which had once been dissolved into Vihara was precisely against the spirit of this law. But Rembang Chinese kept on insisting that Klenteng is no more and no less a Klenteng, and pointed out the following three points as the evidence.

Firstly, both temples had no space dedicated specially for Buddha (Dhammasala). Secondly, there was no residential space for Bhikku / Bhikkuni while there was a space for Biokong, or a Klenteng keeper. Lastly, the rituals which had been practiced in both temples from 1978 to 1995 were not those based on Buddhism doctrines, but those based on Chinese traditional customs and beliefs. As is clear from the third point, in short, they deliberately emphasized Chinese-ness which had formerly been restrained, while denied Buddhism-ness which had formerly been emphasized in contrast.

However, or rather, naturally in Soeharto’s era when officially any Chinese-ness was prohibited to be expressed, the effort of Chinese community in this rural small town attracted attention of the government and was regarded as adventurous and defiant. Their petition was examined at as high as provincial-level meeting of the Department of Home Affairs, and was totally rejected. Besides that, staffs of the national intelligence agency BAKIN were sent from Jakarta, and the whole story of this status-change affair was investigated.

To cope with these official reactions, the boarding members of Yayasan Dwi Kumala submitted the documents which explained how Tjoe Hwie Kiong and Hok Tik Bio were unworthy as Vihara, or in other words, how these facilities were full of characteristics of Chinese, or of Klenteng. In so doing, they appealed legitimacy of their claim in official



channel. But at the same time, in back channel they emphasized both implicitly and explicitly that their patron was the famous Chinese broker who had tight connection with the then President. Of course as is quite usual with this country, they never forgot to offer plenty of bribes to the officials concerned.

With these efforts, in August 1996, both Tjoe Hwie Kiong and Hok Tik Bio were finally admitted by the Department of Home Affairs to return to their original status, namely Klenteng. And in December of the same year, the statues of Buddha which had been added to Tjoe Hwie Kiong were removed, and then the registration of both temples as Vihara was officially deleted by the Department of Religious Affairs.

Between two kinds of official dichotomies

Now, let me sum up the above mentioned process of status-change of the temples in Rembang. As is shown in the chart below (see **Chart 1**), here we have two kinds of dichotomies which had meaningful importance during Soeharto's era, that is to say, *Agama / Kepercayaan* axis on the one hand, and *Cina / Non-Cina* or emphasis / restraint on Chinese-ness, on the other. Usually in Chinese temples, there are a lot of divine statues of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. (The fusion of these 3 doctrines is called *Tri-Dharma*). There is also an altar for ancestors, and periodically traditional festivals of Chinese origin are held in the same places. Of course several Javanese elements also penetrated those rituals, and additionally, not a few Javanese fishermen devote themselves to the marine goddess *Makco*.

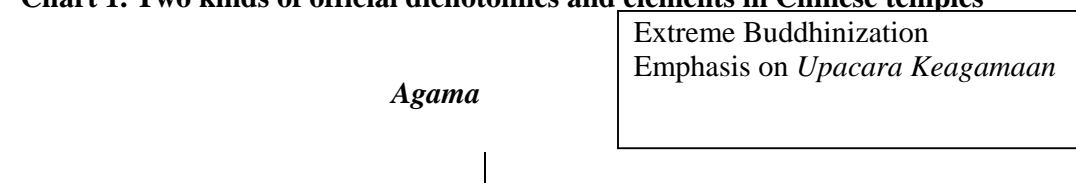
However, it should be noted at the same time that neither Confucianism nor Taoism was acknowledged as *Agama* during *Orde Baru*. Moreover, in Indonesia where the distinction between Chinese and *Pribumi* still has a great social importance, even if there could be found several Javanese elements or Javanese followers, these temples would never be free from being labeled as “something Chinese”. In short, it was hardly possible to orient the temples to upper left or the lower right directions in this chart. And it was also uneasy, or rather, mad to emphasize the lower left nature of the temples in the era when expression of Chinese-ness was illegal. Therefore most of Chinese temples in other towns have been tried not to show their orientation clearly along these axes, and tried to be inconspicuous, and to remain in obscure status.



In the meantime, as we have seen, *Tjoe Hwie Kiong* and *Hok Tik Bio* in Rembang took the way of Buddhization under the strong leadership of a *Mahayana* preacher. Although this process simultaneously meant the restraint of Chinese-ness, most of community members approved of this direction as a way of political self-protection. In a word, two temples in Rembang made their way to the upper-right direction in the chart.

However, as time went, frustration of the members gradually accumulated, then finally the accidental political intervention by *Kantor Sospol* prompted them to rethink the status of both temples which once had been settled as *Vihara*. At this stage, because they once had shown the explicit orientation toward the upper right direction, it was no longer possible for them to back to the ambiguous position, thus they had only to venture to emphasize the lower left nature of the temples, such as tradition, convention, beliefs, and above all, Chinese-ness.

Chart 1. Two kinds of official dichotomies and elements in Chinese temples



<i>Tri-Dharma</i> (= Confucianism, Taoism + Buddhism)	Buddhism (Authorized Religion)
Chinese traditional rituals Ancestor worship Function as a resting & gathering place for community members	Javanese elements in temples or rituals People's activities of trans-ethnic nature <i>Makco</i> worship by local Javanese fishermen

Without doubts, in this status-change affair of the temples in Rembang, what became the backgrounds were several interlaced factors, such as the official policy, and the frustration or conflict arisen from the daily lives of small Chinese community, and the social identities which they should irresistibly accept. And under these circumstances, although following the official dichotomies of *Orde Baru*, Ethnic-Chinese in Rembang deliberately manipulated them and chose, expressed, and constructed their Chinese-ness through *Klenteng*.

Where do their collective identities go?

Now, as to the collective identities of them, instead of giving a clear-cut or catchphrase-like conclusion, I will tell an interesting sequel to the story of the *Klenteng* in Rembang.

As I stated above, the process of changing status from *Vihara* to *Klenteng* was featured by emphasis on Chinese-ness. And under the banner of this Chinese-ness which had been carefully avoided before, the new administrative organization of *Klenteng*: *Yayasan Dwi Kumala* succeeded in re-concentrating the Chinese community in Rembang, especially re-uniting those who believed in Catholicism.

Indeed, when facing the total national crisis around 1998, *Yayasan Dwi Kumala* became the basis for a provisional secret organization of Chinese community in Rembang, which fought to protect the interests of all Chinese living in this town. This secret organization even went so far as to send a representative of Chinese community to DPRD Rembang (the prefecture council) in the next year, and ultimately this organization was aimed to become a permanent



comprehensive organization of Chinese community (just like *Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan* in the early 20th).

Here I will not give a detailed account of the whole story of it. But it would be enough to point out that, although Chinese in Rembang had once been united since the status change of the temples, but soon after the severe condition confronting them around 1998 had settled calm, they gradually lost a direct need for solidarity, and the secret organization itself was disappeared.

Few years later, one of the temples in this small town, namely *Tjoe Hwie Kiong*, unexpectedly get into the limelight again. This time, a pair of local Chinese heroes worshiped in this *Klenteng*¹² has suddenly attracted the attention of a certain Ethnic-Chinese association in Jakarta. In a mood of Chinese cultural renaissance after the end of *Orde Baru*, this association looked for a candidate for Indonesian National Hero of Chinese origin, with the purpose of emphasizing contribution of Ethnic-Chinese to Indonesian nation building. Of course it was expected that by this project of promoting an Ethnic-Chinese to *Pahlawan Nasional*, the social position of this formerly oppressed minority group as a whole would improve.

In this view, the local Chinese heroes enshrined in Rembang area were thought to be quite ideal, because they are historical Chinese rebel leaders who fought in cooperation with Javanese lords against VOC in early 1740s, and moreover, at least one of these Chinese leaders was possibly Muslim¹³. Quite natural, these figures were regarded as bearing great potential for transcending the worn-out dichotomies, such as Chinese versus Javanese, or Chinese versus Muslim.

In order to realize the promotion of these two local heroes to national heroes, members of the huge Chinese association carried out a field survey at Rembang area, and at the same time requested both *Yayasan Dwi Kumala* and its counterpart in the neighboring town Lasem to cooperate with them. But interestingly, both the managerial organizations of the temples in Rembang and Lasem disapproved of accepting the offer from Jakarta.

¹² Both heroes, *Tan Keh Hwie* and *Oey Ing Kiat*, were leaders of Chinese rebels who fought with Javanese lords against VOC in early 1740s. Now they are enshrined as *Gie Yong Kong* or *Tan Oey Djie Sian Sheng* only in 3 *Klentengs* in Rembang area, namely, in Lasem, Rembang and Juwana.

¹³ For original source of these heroes, see [Kamzah, 1858]. For a historical analysis, see [Rommelink, 1994]. See also [Setiono, 2003: pp107-159].



First of all, since this offer was made a few months before the general election 2004, Chinese in this rural area felt afraid of being deeply involved into politics, and being too conspicuous especially in that nervous time. Besides that, they felt embarrassed, or felt somewhat “*aneh*” or strange to hear that the pair of enshrined local heroes which had long been thought to be unimportant would suddenly be picked up as a symbol of Ethnic-Chinese in Indonesia. After all, most of Chinese in Rembang paid little attention to this project, and indeed until now the pair of local heroes hasn’t been promoted to *Pahlawan Nasional*.

As is implied by this issue, for now, we cannot conclude whether the collective identities which once have been formed by Chinese in Rembang are still growing, or whether those constructed identities are going to be led into collective identities as “Pan-Chinese in Indonesia” in *Era Reformasi*. Everything is now in process, still remains to be observed carefully.

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Rangkaian Kronologis ----- a bundle of the photocopy of the documents about the status-change issue of the temples in Rembang, which includes a chronological data of the issue, the rules and regulations of *Yayasan Metta Bhumi* and *Yayasan Dwi Kumala*, and other official documents relating to this issue. Compiled by one of directorial members of Yayasan.

