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## **Sino-Indo Muslim Cultures: Tracing the History and Legacy of Cheng Ho and Chinese Muslims in Nusantara**

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### **Abstract**

This study re-examines the formation of Muslim communities in the Malay–Indonesian world through the presence of Zheng He, with particular attention to the role of Chinese Muslim networks in the early history of Islam in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in historical and library-based research, the study focuses its analysis on Javanese historical evidence related to diplomacy, maritime networks, and religious life prior to the period of European expansion. The findings demonstrate that Chinese Muslim networks were deeply embedded in diplomatic relations, maritime trade, and religious practices in the archipelago from an early period. Chinese Muslim influences contributed to the shaping of local Islamic practices while also broadening the cultural horizons of early Muslim communities in the region. A reassessment of several dominant Islamization theories further suggests that Sino-Indonesian Muslim interactions provide strong grounds for recognizing the “Chinese theory” as an important perspective alongside Arab, Persian, and Indian theories. This article makes a significant contribution to scholarship on Islamization and the history of Islam in the Malay–Indonesian world by affirming the plural genealogies of Indonesian Islam and enriching analytical frameworks on diaspora, mobility, and intercultural exchange in the making of Muslim societies in Nusantara.

### **Keywords:**

Cheng Ho, China, Chinese Muslim, Indonesian Islam, Java, Nusantara



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### Abstrak

Studi ini meneliti kembali pembentukan komunitas Muslim di dunia Melayu-Indonesia melalui kehadiran Zheng He, dengan perhatian khusus pada peran jaringan Muslim Tionghoa dalam sejarah awal Islam di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang berlandaskan penelitian historis dan berbasis pustaka, studi ini memfokuskan analisisnya pada bukti sejarah Jawa yang berkaitan dengan diplomasi, jaringan maritim, dan kehidupan keagamaan sebelum periode ekspansi Eropa. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa jaringan Muslim Tionghoa tertanam kuat dalam hubungan diplomatik, perdagangan maritim, dan praktik keagamaan di kepulauan tersebut sejak awal. Pengaruh Muslim Tionghoa berkontribusi pada pembentukan praktik Islam lokal sekaligus memperluas cakrawala budaya komunitas Muslim awal di wilayah tersebut. Penilaian ulang beberapa teori Islamisasi dominan lebih lanjut menunjukkan bahwa interaksi Muslim Tionghoa-Indonesia memberikan landasan yang kuat untuk mengakui "teori Tionghoa" sebagai perspektif penting di samping teori Arab, Persia, dan India. Artikel ini memberikan kontribusi signifikan terhadap kajian tentang Islamisasi dan sejarah Islam di dunia Melayu-Indonesia dengan menegaskan genealogi pluralistik Islam Indonesia dan memperkaya kerangka analitis tentang diaspora, mobilitas, dan pertukaran antarbudaya dalam pembentukan masyarakat Muslim di Nusantara.

### Kata Kunci:

Cheng Ho, Jawa, Kepulauan, Muslim Indonesia, Muslim Tionghoa, Tiongkok

### Introduction

In a conversation with me more than two decades ago, the late Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009), a renowned scholar of Islam and the fourth President of Indonesia, who once claimed to have Chinese blood, said as follows:

“Chinese Muslims had indeed played an important role in introducing and spreading Islam in Java and other places in Nusantara. They introduced rationalistic Hanafi Islam and philosophical Sufism (*tasawuf falsafi*). At first, they resided on the northern coast of Java before moving and spreading to other places. Chinese role and contributions to the spread of Islam can be seen from the presence of Sampotoalang Mosque in

Semarang and a grave named Shaikh Abdul Qodir Al-Shini in Trowulan, a former capital city of the Majapahit Kingdom. The word “*al-shini*” indicates that he was a Chinese Muslim. Indeed, he was a Chinese Muslim whose original name was Tan Kim Han.” (Al Qurtuby, 2003)

As Wahid said, Chinese Muslims have indeed played a significant role in introducing Islam in Java or Nusantara. One of the legendary Chinese Muslim figures, directly or indirectly, who contributed to the spread of Islam in Java and other locations in Nusantara, was Zheng He or Cheng Ho (1371-1433), whose legacy can still be witnessed today, and his presence in Nusantara in the fifteenth century has inspired the birth of multiple literary works (books or poetry) and creative arts (including movies, dramas, and dances) in contemporary Indonesia.

For example, on Friday, June 25, 2004, a new dance combining Javanese traditions and Chinese cultural expressions was performed at the Sono Seni Studio in the Kemlayan area of Solo, Central Java. This dance is called *Bedhaya Layar Cheng Ho (Bedhaya on Sail to Cheng Ho)*. The new work is rooted in the Bedhaya dance form, a distinctive ancient dance form, and combines it with Beijing Opera-style dance movements. As its name suggests, this dance refers to the legendary voyages of the great Chinese admiral and navigator Cheng Ho or Zheng He in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.

This work was conducted by several experts, not only from Indonesia but also from Singapore and Taiwan. Among them are Peter Sau Jia Liang from Singapore (as scriptwriter, dramaturg, and dance assistant), Themis Lin Pei Ann from Taiwan (as researcher), Thio Tiong Gie from Indonesia, and a puppeteer Poo Tay Hie from Semarang and, certainly, Bambang Besur Suryono, a dance artist who was educated in Javanese dance and deepened his knowledge of arts and culture at the Indonesian Arts College in Surakarta.

What makes this performance interesting is that it involves various artistic elements: the gamelan orchestra accompanying the dance is paired with Islamic vocals and lyrics as well as Javanese *sindhenan* (traditional singing). In addition, there is also a performance of the Poo Tay Hie puppet show, Chinese poetry recitations, and Pat Im music (a form of Chinese music played by Javanese people living in the Balong area of Solo). The costumes chosen also represent a blend of Chinese and Javanese cultures. The “cross-cultural” atmosphere between China and Java is clearly reflected throughout the production, from the initial research and creative process of *Bedhaya Layar Cheng Ho* to the performance and the costumes of the dancers, to illustrate a truly fitting depiction of the cultural acculturation among Chinese, Islamic, and Javanese traditions.

The voyages of Cheng Ho themselves have left an extraordinary historical legacy across the regions he visited, including Nusantara and other parts of Southeast Asia (Adi Ignatius, 2001). These maritime expeditions have inspired hundreds of scholarly and literary works, both fictional and non-fictional, as well as technological innovations in European maritime and shipbuilding sciences following the age of exploration he helped inaugurate. The popular legend of “Sinbad the Sailor” (*Sindibadu al-Bahri*) from the Middle East, a fictional mariner and the hero of a story-cycle, is also said to have drawn inspiration from Cheng Ho’s legendary journeys (Seagrave, 2004). In Indonesia, especially on the island of Java, one can still find undeniable historical traces of cultural and social encounters that emerged as a side effect of Cheng Ho’s “diplomatic” and goodwill missions.

In addition, several literary works tell stories about Cheng Ho/Sam Po Kong, including those by Sylado (2004). The oral tale of Dampu Awang, deeply rooted among communities along Java’s northern coast, is also believed to have been influenced by the legend of Cheng Ho. For this reason, a series of international conferences by various organizations in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and other places to commemorate Cheng Ho’s monumental voyages is an appropriate and insightful initiative. Cheng Ho is, without doubt, a historical figure who deserves remembrance.

This article studies the history of Cheng Ho in Nusantara (modern-day Indonesia), especially Java, one of Nusantara’s vibrant and cosmopolitan maritime areas before the European colonial era, as a window into investigating the legacy of Chinese Muslims in their roles of introducing and developing Islam in Indonesia’s past. The presence of Cheng Ho, along with his Chinese Muslim fellows (e.g., Ma Huan, Fei Shin, Heo Shien, and others), as well as the existence of Sino-Indo Muslim cultures, mirrors the contributions of Chinese Muslims in the introduction and spread of Islam on the Malay-Indonesian archipelago.

### **Methods**

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that integrates historical inquiry, textual analysis, and cultural comparison. Primary sources, such as *babad*, hagiographies, classical travel accounts, and early records of Chinese and Persianate presence in the Indonesian archipelago, were closely examined to identify narrative patterns of mobility, conversion, and intercultural encounter. These materials were triangulated with secondary scholarship on maritime trade, diaspora communities, and Islamic cultural formations along the Javanese coast. In addition, archival field notes and documentation from earlier observations of performance traditions were revisited to analyze iconographic motifs, ritual functions, and embodied

practices that reflect long-term cultural exchange. This combination of textual, historical, and performative analysis enables the study to interpret Javanese coastal arts as dynamic repositories of Sino–Indo Muslim interactions, revealing how aesthetic forms preserve complex layers of religious, political, and diasporic memory.

## **Result and Discussion**

### ***A Brief History of Cheng Ho***

Who was Cheng Ho, and why was his influence so profound? Cheng Ho was the name given by Cheng Tzu or Chu Teh, who was better known as Emperor Yung Lo, the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, reigning from 1403 to 1424. His original name was Ma Ho (born in 1370 CE), who came from a poor Hui ethnic family in Yunnan. The Hui are a Chinese Muslim community of mixed Mongol-Turkic descent. Because he served to help overthrow Emperor Kien Wen, Cheng Ho was eventually granted an important position by Emperor Yung Lo as commander of thousands of palace servants in the Imperial Household Department, serving the emperor as secret police (Seagrave, 2004). This was a highly influential position, unlike the appointment of a new head of Opus Dei by the Pope in the Vatican.

As a mark of imperial trust, Cheng Ho was later granted command of a grand maritime expedition through an Imperial Decree, designating him as Commander in Chief. Meanwhile, the positions of deputy and secretary were held respectively by Vice Admiral Heo Shien (Husain) and by Ma Huan and Fei Shin (Faisal). Serving as interpreters of the Arabic language, in addition to Ma Huan—who was indeed fluent in Arabic—was Hassan, an imam from the former capital city of Sin An (Chang’an). In carrying out this “maritime diplomacy policy,” Emperor Yung Lo deployed a fleet consisting of 62 large ships accompanied by 225 junks (smaller vessels) and 27,550 officers and soldiers, including astronomers, politicians, cartographers, linguists, geographers, physicians, scribes, and religious scholars. This story was later recorded, among others, in the *Ming Shi* (“History of the Ming Dynasty”).

Since 1405, from the beginning of Cheng Ho’s voyages until he died in 1433, he had undertaken seven voyages and visited more than 37 countries — from various ports in Nusantara and the Indian Ocean to Sri Lanka, Quilon (Ceylon), Cochin, Calicut, Hormuz, Jeddah, Mogadishu, and Malindi. From Champa to India, and from along the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea to the coast of Kenya. In terms of both scale and duration, Cheng Ho’s expeditions far surpassed those of any European explorers, such as Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, Ferdinand Magellan, Francis Drake, and others.

Because of his extraordinary achievements, Cheng Ho became increasingly mythologized and was given the imperial title Ma San Bao (“Ma,

the Three Jewels”). This title is a play on a type of Chinese affectionate expression. In today’s Chinese communities in some areas of Indonesia, Cheng Ho has become a revered mythological figure. He is not only admired and honored as a “Great Navigator,” but also worshiped as a “deity” in various temples under the name *Sam Po Kong*, particularly by followers of traditional Chinese ancestral religions. Over time, Cheng Ho has been known by various honorific names, including Sam Poo Tay Djin, Sam Poo Tay Kam, and Sam Poo Toa Lang.

The phenomenon of “deifying” and worshiping Cheng Ho in temples is a form of historical anachronism, mainly because Cheng Ho was a mere human being and (let us not forget) a Muslim. Even more regrettably, the history of Cheng Ho is often written in a hagiographic manner, exaggerated, and tending to “go beyond the human realm” rather than through a critical historical approach. As a result, Cheng Ho is often portrayed as an almost perfect human being, belonging more to the world of myth than to that of history. In reality, however, Cheng Ho was an ordinary Chinese Muslim like many others, with his own historical limitations. Perhaps his greatest contribution was in establishing friendships and relationships between China and other nations or kingdoms around the world that were strengthened through cultural exchange, which remains visible in Java and other locations in Indonesia. Nevertheless, it is a fact that Indonesians, including the Chinese, tend to see and treat Cheng Ho in a different way. Some view Cheng Ho as an ordinary person with extraordinary achievement, while others treat him as a “superhuman” or “distinctive ancestor” who deserves to be venerated.

In Java, there has indeed emerged what I refer to as the “Sino–Javanese Muslim Cultures,” stretching from Banten, Jakarta, Cirebon, Semarang, Demak, Jepara, Lasem, to Gresik and Surabaya, resulting from the encounters between Cheng Ho and other Chinese Muslims with the Javanese world. The manifestations of the Sino–Javanese Muslim cultures are evident not only in various Islamic religious architectures (mosques) that exhibit Javanese, Islamic, and Chinese elements, but also in artistic and literary traditions, such as batik motifs, woodcarving, and other cultural forms.

### ***The Chinese Influences in the Islamization of Nusantara***

Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, Islam was no longer appearing as a sporadic community but had become a well-structured society with an organized system. During this time, an important historical turning point also occurred in Java: the fall of the Majapahit Kingdom (1293-1527), followed by the establishment of Islamic kingdoms (*vorstendommen*) along Java’s northern coast, which were centered in Demak (Toer, 1925-2006). Since the political revolution of 1478, which marked the fall of the Majapahit Kingdom and the

founding of the Demak Sultanate (also known as Demak Bintara), the coastal regions that had once been the backbone of the kingdom's economy, with their ports serving as centers of international trade, gradually separated themselves, and some even became "no man's lands", such as Gresik.

Raden Patah (1455-1518), as the first ruler of the Demak sultanate, was a foreigner (a Chinese Muslim named Jin Bun or Jin Wen) with a strong obsession with building a maritime Islamic state on the northern coast of Java. However, his ambition came to an end after Trenggana (*Malay Annals: Tung Ka Lo*) died in 1546 during a battle against Panarukan, which had allied itself with the Portuguese. Meanwhile, his successors lacked the qualifications of capable leaders; even among Raden Patah's descendants, long and bloody conflicts broke out until finally Senapati (Sutawijaya, 1537-1601) succeeded in overthrowing Jaka Tingkir or Hadiwijaya, the ruler of the Pajang sultanate (r. 1549-1582) and establishing the Islamic Mataram Empire in the Javanese inland.

Ascending to the throne in 1475, Patah remained a vassal of Majapahit until 1478. After legitimizing the Demak sultanate as the successor state to the Majapahit kingdom, with Walisongo appointing him the Sultan of Demak, Raden Patah took the title Panembahan Jimbun, meaning a "strong person, (Muljana, 1968)" who was able to defeat and reach victory over the giant Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Majapahit. Thus, the meaning of Jin Bun is synonymous with the Arabic "Fatah" or "Patah" (a Javanized Arabic).

According to Abdurrahman Wahid (in a conversation with me in 2002), besides Jin Bun, the actors contributing to the fall of Majapahit (thereby, the founding of the Demak kingdom) were Maulana Ishak (the father of Sunan Giri), Sunan Ngudung (the father of Sunan Kudus), and Tan Kim Han, an eminent Chinese Muslim leader, mentioned in the opening paragraph of this article.

In the meantime, the Walisongo Supreme Council (Dewan Wali) had not yet established its authority because its presence was still in infancy. It was only during the Sultan Trenggana era (r. 1505-1513 & 1521-1546), Demak's greatest sultan, that the kingdom's political territory became clear. Trenggana's political policy, unlike his predecessors (Patah and Pate Unus), was more focused on building a land power with cavalry forces than establishing a maritime power. In so doing, Trenggana allied with the Chinese community, represented by their prominent leader, Babah Liem Mo Han (also known as Babah Liem), who was also a Muslim. The target of this Javanese-Chinese secret alliance was to destroy the Portuguese, but it failed. Babah Liem not only mobilized Chinese forces to fight against the Portuguese but also is credited as the architect of the Mantingan Mosque in Jepara, Central Java.

Therefore, it is not surprising that this mosque has Chinese elements and ornaments (Toer, 1925-2006).

Babah Liem was a leader and prominent figure of *Nan Lung* (“Southern Dragon”), an overseas Chinese organization, seeking to preserve the civilization and culture of their ancestral land, which was highly respected by Chinese communities along the northern coast of Java (Toer, 1925-2006). *Nan Lung* was established after the legendary expedition of Cheng Ho. It is unclear whether Cheng Ho himself instructed his followers to build *Nan Lung* or his loyalists, who voluntarily established this Chinese organization as a medium to channel and build a network with Chinese communities in Nusantara and/or mainland China.

Through *Nan Lung* and the Chinese community, Babah Liem was appointed as a liaison between *Lao Sam* (Lasem) and *Toa-lang* (Semarang), besides serving as a representative of the Chinese community to Demak. Liem Mo Han, it should be noted, was not the only eminent Chinese Muslim figure at the time (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries). Other important Chinese Muslim figures included Coa Mie An and Gouw Eng Cu, the latter being the leader and elder of the Chinese community in Lasem. The presence of Chinese Muslims was not only recorded by local accounts but also by foreign ones.

For example, Portuguese traveler Tome Pires (Pires, 1944), Chinese chronicler Ma Huan (Huan, 1970), and Dutch observer Loedewicks (Al Qurtuby, 2003) all recorded the presence of Chinese Muslims in these coastal regions. Furthermore, some Indonesian scholars, such as Slamet Muljana, S. Wardi, and Pangeran Hadiwidjaja, also identified several Chinese Muslim figures in pre-colonial Nusantara, such as Sunan Kalijaga (Gan Si Cang or Oei Sam Ik), Ki Ageng Gribig (Siauw Dji Bik), Ki Ageng Pengging (Heng Pa Hing), Sunan Bonang (Bo Bing Nang), and Sultan Pajang (Na Pao Tjing) (Graaf, 1981). The Chinese Muslims who settled in Java were the side effect (or byproduct) of the long-standing relationship between Java and China, which had long been established since ancient times.

### ***Sino-Nusantara Relations: A Historical Retrospect***

The relations between Nusantara, especially Java (in Chinese texts: *She-po*, *Zhao-wa*) and China, both in terms of “diplomatic” (political) relations between the two countries/kingdoms and trade contacts, have existed since classical times, long before Islam arrived in the region. Some historians have acknowledged this issue (Vlekke, 1943). The Sino-Nusantara relationship continued and was more intensive, particularly when China was ruled by the Ming Dynasty (c. 1368–1644 AD), which showed considerable appreciation for the Muslim community there.

The *Ming Shi* (“History of the Ming Dynasty”), on one hand, and the accounts compiled during Cheng Ho’s voyages, especially the *Ying-yai Sheng-lan* written by Ma Huan (around 1416), on the other, clearly show that trade activities between China and Nusantara, particularly Java and Sumatra, during that period (around the fifteenth century) increased significantly (Huan, 1970), and within Java itself, the role of the Chinese community in commerce and maritime affairs also grew over time (Lombard, 1996) & (Reid, 1992).

At the diplomatic level, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, political relations between Java and China were also stable. Around 1410, the Chinese government (Ming Dynasty) officially took Java’s (i.e., Majapahit’s) side against Malacca (Melaka), which was claiming sovereignty over Palembang (in Chinese texts: Kukang), and sent a letter containing this decision to the ruler of Majapahit. This meant that Java’s supremacy over Srivijaya (c. 671-1025), a Buddhist kingdom based on the island of Sumatra, was formally recognized and legitimized, a matter that had been disputed and unresolved since the expedition of Kertanegara (r. 1268-1292), the greatest king of the Singasari kingdom, in 1275 against the Malay kingdom.

Among the various pieces of information gathered from Chinese sources, perhaps the most interesting is what is reported in the *Ming Shi* and *Ying-yai Sheng-lan* regarding the Chinese communities from Canton (Kwangchou), Zhangzhou (Chang-chou), Quanzhou (Chuan-chou), and other regions of southern China who had left China and settled in the eastern coastal ports, especially Tuban, Gresik, and Surabaya, all in East Java. According to these texts, most of the Chinese inhabitants along Java’s northern coast in the early fifteenth century lived in relative prosperity, and most interestingly, some had already embraced Islam and were devout in their religious observance (Groenendeveldt, 1960).

The testimony of Ma Huan (courtesy name Zongdao, 1380-1460), a Chinese Muslim explorer, translator, and travel writer who accompanied several of Cheng Ho’s expeditions, regarding the Chinese from Canton, Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, and other southern coastal regions of China who had embraced Islam, is, in fact, not surprising. These regions were historically known as centers of Muslim communities in China, formed through centuries of interaction between the Chinese and the Arabs. Lo Hsiang Lin, in his study “*Islam in Canton in the Sung Period*,” notes that the Chinese had already encountered Islam during its earliest centuries, as far back as the 7th century CE (Eberhard, 1967). The *Chinese Annals* from the Tang Dynasty (618–960) also record the presence of Muslim settlements in Canton, Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, and other ports along the southern coast of China.

One of the most compelling historical proofs of Muslim existence in this region is the presence of two ancient mosques in Canton: *Kwang Tah Se* (“The Great Minaret Mosque”) and *Chee Lin Se* (“The Mosque of the Single Horn”), which several historians consider to be among the oldest mosques in the world, second only to the Prophet’s Mosque (*Masjid Nabawi*) built by the Prophet Muhammad in Madinah (Ma, 1979). Thus, Ma Huan’s firsthand account of Muslim Chinese communities from Canton, Zhangzhou, and Quanzhou residing and trading in the ports of Gresik, Tuban, and Surabaya in the early fifteenth century appears entirely plausible and historically consistent.

The existence of Chinese Muslims in Java during the late medieval period (particularly the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) was not limited to East Java, as observed by Ma Huan, but was widespread along the entire northern coast of the island. The Dutch traveler Loedewicks, who visited Banten in the sixteenth century, as recorded by Stutterheim in his scholarly account of the Majapahit court, also witnessed the existence of this Chinese Muslim community, which in VOC (the Dutch East Indies Company) documents was referred to as *geschoren Chineezen* (“shaven Chinese”) (Stutterheim, 1948). Evidence of the existence of Chinese Muslims in Java and even in Southeast Asia during these centuries was also provided by Ibn Battuta, the traveler from the Maghreb, who in the mid-fifteenth century journeyed around the world, exploring coastal regions from Arabia to China and Southeast Asia, as described in his book *Rihlah ibn Battutah*, edited by Thalal Harb (Battuta, 1964).

### ***The Chinese Traces in Javanese Chronicles and Local Traditions***

The information obtained from the direct observations above strongly supports Javanese traditions regarding the origins of the spread of Islam in Java. These traditions were generally preserved in the *babad* (chronicles) texts composed later (during the Islamic Mataram period, particularly during the reign of Sultan Agung, r. 1613-1645). Although wrapped in myth, the information described in the *babad* reflects the cosmopolitan atmosphere that once existed in the coastal ports of Java. The emerging new vibrant communities in these northern coastal areas (*pesisiran*) later managed to challenge and overthrow the agrarian power of Majapahit in the interior or inland of Java (*pedalaman*). In fact, several local texts explicitly mention the presence of Chinese Muslims during the early development of Islam in Java, as shown in the *Babad Tanah Djawi*, *Serat Kandaning Ringgit Purwa*, *Carita (Sejarah) Lasem*, *Babad Cerbon*, *Hikayat Hasanuddin*, and others.

Interestingly, almost all local Javanese historiographies tell that Raden Patah, the first ruler of Demak, was a Chinese Muslim. The only difference

lies in Raden Patah's genealogy. While local West Javanese texts link the legendary king's origins to Mongol China (for instance, *Hikayat Hasanuddin* mentions his ancestor as Cek Ko Po from "Munggul" [Mongolia], while *Sadjarah Banten* refers to him as Cu-Cu), several local Central Javanese texts, such as the *Babad Tanah Djawi*, *Serat Kanda*, and *Tembang Babad Demak*, relate him to King Brawijaya of the Majapahit kingdom (perhaps, Brawijaya V), who married a Chinese princess (some accounts name this Chinese princess Sio Ban Chi, the daughter of Shaikh Bentong or Kyai Bantong, who was also a Chinese Muslim). If Raden Patah were a Chinese Muslim, the Demak sultanate could be considered a Chinese regime.

Furthermore, folktales from various coastal regions of Java also mention Chinese Muslim figures who played significant roles in the process of Islamization in these areas, such as the story of Cie Gwie Wan, the "right-hand man" of Sultan Hadlirin and the founder of the woodcarving tradition in Jepara, who was popularly known as Sungging Badar Duwung for his mastery in the art of carving. The tomb of Cie Gwie Wan is in the Astana Sultan Hadlirin graveyard complex in Jepara, Central Java.

In fact, according to the northern Javanese coastal local text, *Serat Kandaning Ringgit Purwa*, Sultan Hadlirin (the husband of Queen Kalinyamat) himself was a Chinese Muslim named Win-tang or Tjie Bin Thang. According to this local text, Hadlirin was originally a wealthy merchant whose ship was wrecked in a storm, and he was stranded in a place which later called Jung Mara (Jepara). The name "jung" refers to the name of a Chinese ship, while "mara" or "moro" means "coming" in Javanese. It is said that he was converted to Islam by Sunan Kudus through the guidance of another Chinese Muslim, Rakim, and was given the new name Hadlirin, meaning "comer" or "newcomer."

Another notable Chinese Muslim figure, according to Java's local traditions, is Kyai Telingsing or "Mbah Sing" (Tan Ling Sing or The Ling Sing), who was a *dakwah* (proselytizing) partner of Sunan Kudus or Ja'far Shadiq in Kudus. Muslims from various regions, not only Kudus but also other locations, venerate his grave in Kudus and continue to preserve his teachings to this day. One of Telingsing's teachings, still alive and remembered by local Muslims, is "*solat sacolo saloho dongo sampurno*," which means "salat serves as a perfect prayer or supplication." In Salatiga (still in Central Java), furthermore, especially in the Kalibening area, local Muslim traditions trace their origins to another Chinese Muslim, Lie Beng Ing (Al Qurtuby, 2003).

Not only in Central and East Java, but narratives of Chinese Muslims also exist in West Java. For example, Cirebon's local traditions and texts mention several prominent Chinese Muslim figures, such as Tan Eng Hoat (his title is Maulana Ifdhil Hanafi), Tan Sam Cai or Muhammad Syafi'i (an early

monetary expert in the Cirebon Sultanate), Kung Sam Pak or Muhammad Murjani (a descendant of Kung Wu Ping, the builder of a lighthouse in Sembung, Cirebon), and Tan Hong Tien Nio—better known as Putri Ong Tien—the Chinese Muslim wife of Sunan Gunung Jati (also known as Sayyid al-Kamil or Syarif Hidayatullah). Together with the sunan, these Chinese Muslim figures contributed both to the spread of Islam and the territorial expansion of the Cirebon Sultanate across West Java.

Interestingly, local oral traditions of Chinese Muslims are found not only in Java but also in Bali. In the local Islamic tradition of Bali, one of the *Wali Tujuh* or “Seven Saints” (a group analogous to Java’s Walisongo) was a Chinese Muslim named Shaikh Abdul Qodir Muhammad, also known as The Kwan Pao Lie. His tomb lies in the village of Temukus (Labuan Aji), Banjar District, Buleleng Regency, Singaraja, and is locally revered as *Keramat Karangrupit* (Zen, 1998).

Tan Yeok Seong, in his study of Nyai Gede Pinatih, a powerful and wealthy female merchant of Gresik of East Java, known in local tradition as the foster mother of Sunan Giri (Raden Paku), said that she was a Chinese Muslim woman descended from Shih Chin Ching (Shi Jinqing), an overlord (*Yang Dipertuan Besar*) and a wealthy businessman of Palembang during the Majapahit era. The name *Pinatih* is believed to be a localized adaptation (*verbastering*) of the Chinese term *Pi Na Ti* or Shi Da-jie (Seong, 1983). After the death of her father, Cheng Ho decided to choose his older brother to be a Chinese representative (“ambassador”) in Palembang. Due to an internal tension or a family conflict, Shi Da-jie (born as Shishi Daniangzi) went or migrated to Gresik. Later, because of her talent in business and management, a Majapahit ruler appointed her as a “*syahbandar*” (harbourmaster) of Gresik (Reid, 2017) (c. 1458-1483). Nyai Gede Pinatih is said to have been the main financial supporter behind the rise of Giri Kedaton, the Islamic kingdom founded by Sunan Giri.

The Dutch historian de Graaf also noted that Sunan Giri (Raden Paku), though not Chinese himself, employed many Chinese Muslims as civil and military officers to administer his mini-kingdom, the Giri Kedaton. In his work *Soerabaja in de XVII Eeuw van Koninkrijk tot Regentschap* (“Surabaya in the 17th Century: From Kingdom to Regency”), De Graaf recorded that around forty Chinese Muslims served under Sunan Dalem (Prabu Satmata), the second ruler of Giri Kedaton.

The *Babad Tanah Djawi* (Balai Pustaka edition, IX: 67–68) recounts that during Giri’s war against Prince Pekik of Surabaya (Sultan Agung’s son-in-law), its forces included not only *modin*, *santri*, *ketib*, and *penghulu*, but also about 200 Chinese Muslim soldiers. According to several well-acknowledged accounts, the last war commander of Giri in its battle against

Mataram was a Chinese Muslim named Endrasena, the adopted son of Panembahan Kawistuwu (also known as Mas Wetan), successor to Sunan Prapen. This figure remains recognized to this day in the annals of Javanese history (Budiman, 1979).

***Historical and Archeological Footprints of Cheng Ho and Chinese Muslims***

It is important to note that the existence of Chinese Muslims during the early spread of Islam in Java is evidenced not only by testimonies of foreign travelers, Chinese sources, Javanese local texts, and oral traditions, but also by numerous Islamic historical and archaeological remains that reveal a strong Chinese influence. These findings suggest the emergence, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, of what may be called *Sino-Indo Muslim Culture*, an acculturation of Chinese, Islamic, and Nusantara/Indonesian civilizations.

The stone carvings on the ancient Mantingan Mosque in Jepara, the mosque tower in Banten's *Pecinan* quarter, the carved doors of Sunan Giri's tomb in Gresik, the architecture of the Cirebon Palace and Sunyaragi Garden, the unique construction of Demak Mosque—particularly its *saka tatal* (pillar made of wood fragments) and turtle emblem—and the old Sekayu Mosque in Semarang, all demonstrate a strong infusion of Chinese aesthetic and structural influence. The most concrete historical legacies of the Chinese Muslim community, however, are the two ancient mosques in Jakarta: the Kali Angke Mosque, associated with Gouw Tjay, and the Kebon Jeruk Mosque, established by Tamien Dosol Seeng and Madam Cai.

In the Sekayu Mosque, the oldest mosque in Semarang, Central Java (referred to as *Masjid Pekayuan* by Aboebakar Atjeh) (Atjeh, 1955), Chinese inscriptions and decorative motifs can still be seen along the roof beams. These are compelling archaeological signs of a historical intermingling of faith (religion) and culture. Beyond these, several controversial ancient temples (*kelenteng*) are believed by some historians to have originally been mosques built by Chinese Muslims in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. These include the Ancol Temple in Jakarta (also known as *Kelenteng Nyai Ronggeng* or *Bahtera Bhakti Temple*), the Talang Temple in Cirebon, the Gedung Batu (*Sampokong*) Temple in Simongan–Semarang, the Sampo Kong Temple in Tuban, and the Mbah Ratu Temple in Surabaya (Al Qurtuby, 2003).

The *Kelenteng Nyai Ronggeng* (or *Bahtera Bhakti Temple*) in Ancol—located about twenty-five meters from the Ancol Circuit—is linked to the story of Sam Po Swie Soe, a Chinese Muslim cook (chef) who accompanied Admiral Cheng Ho during his naval expeditions across the world. According to oral legend, during Cheng Ho's voyage to Sunda Kelapa (now Jakarta), his cook fell in love with a local *ronggeng* dancer named Sitiwati. The two eventually married, lived together until their deaths, and were buried at the temple

complex alongside Sitiwati's father, Said Areli (Choy, 1977). French historians Denys Lombard and Claudine Salmon, who conducted extensive research on temples (*kelenteng*) in Jakarta and Chinese Muslims in Nusantara, suggested that the construction of the Ancol Temple in its current form, which is a relatively luxurious one, took place only around the 18th century; earlier, its structure had been much simpler (Salmon, 1993). In Surabaya's *Kelenteng Mbah Ratu*, located in a slum area not far from Tanjung Perak Harbor, there is a tomb that is almost always adorned with flowers, incense, prayer beads, and the Qur'an, suggesting continuing veneration by both Muslim and Chinese communities to commemorate Cheng Ho's visits.

The *Kelenteng Gedung Batu* (or *Sampokong Temple*) in Simongan, Semarang, also houses several revered tombs of Chinese Muslims, including Ong King Hong (Wang Ching-Hung), a close associate of Cheng Ho. The scholar Amen Budiman identifies him as a historical figure behind the legendary *Kyai Dampo Awang* (Budiman, 1979). The temple also contains the graves of *Kyai* and *Nyai* Tumpeng, believed to have been Cheng Ho's cooks, and the tomb of *Kyai Cundrik Bumi*, thought to have served as his guard. In that temple, there is also a *bedug* (drum) inscribed with Chinese characters containing a proverb: *mo'len lan ing*, which means "silently affirming the Qur'an with sound." (Ambar, 2001) The temple later became as magnificent as it appears today after the land of the Simongan complex—the site of the Sam Po Kong Temple—was purchased around 1879 by Oei Tjie Sien, the father of Oei Tjong Ham, the wealthy merchant famously known as the "Nusantara Sugar King," from a Jewish landowner named Yohanes (Zhi, 1996).

Later, the site was converted into a Confucian place of worship (that is, transformed into a temple) by a wealthy Chinese man from Cirebon named Mayor Tan Tjie Kie (1853–1920), who at the time was the head of the Kong Ju Kwan Association, based on a decree from the Governor of the Dutch East Indies, *Besluit* dated July 22, 1898, No. 3. Eventually, a Confucian altar table was added to the site in the 1960s by Kho Sin Soan.

Some artefacts showing the imprints of Cheng Ho and other Chinese Muslims in the past century of Nusantara were kept and well-preserved in several museums and cultural centers in Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia, including the LIEM Heritage Museum (Rembang, Central Java), Taman Budaya Tionghoa-Indonesia (Sino-Indonesian Cultural Center), Museum Laksamana Cheng Ho dan Hakka (Admiral Cheng Ho and Hakka Museum), Museum Banda Aceh, or Cheng Ho Cultural Museum (in Melaka), among many others.

### ***Cheng Ho and the Flow of Early Chinese Migration to Nusantara***

Several of the controversial ancient temples mentioned earlier were very likely once mosques (in the simplest form), built by Chinese Muslim immigrants in Java and other places in Nusantara. These Chinese Muslim immigrants, along with those of non-Muslim Chinese, chose to settle on the archipelago rather than return to China for various reasons, including business opportunities, travel and leisure, political security, and even the desire to spread Islam among Chinese Muslims. Probably, the early Chinese Muslim communities inhabiting the northern coastal regions of Java consisted of independent merchants or political refugees fleeing the unstable sociopolitical climate in mainland China at that time. History notes that China experienced several political upheavals, leading to large-scale migrations of Chinese communities to coastal areas across Southeast Asia, including Java or Nusantara in general.

One of the earliest political chaos was the rebellion of Muslims in Canton and other Islamic centers in China around the eighth century. This “insurrection,” as it was called, was brutally suppressed by Huang Chou, who devastated Canton and other Islamic settlements in China (Lann, 1967). Another major political event that triggered a massive migration occurred at the end of the fourteenth century when the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Hung Wu, persecuted the middle class, entrepreneurs, and successful merchants who resisted paying taxes to the state. This resulted in a large-scale flight of capital and people abroad, transforming temporary travelers into permanent expatriates in new lands (Seagrave, 1999).

In addition to these two major events, another possible cause for the presence of Chinese Muslims in Nusantara before the seventeenth century was the China–Mongol political expedition to the Singasari kingdom in East Java, in the late thirteenth century (c. 1293). This military expedition of 20,000 Chinese–Mongol troops, intended as revenge against King Kertanegara, who had previously humiliated the Mongol ambassadors (Ming Qi) during the reign of Kublai Khan of the Yuan Dynasty (r. 1271-1294). Kertanegara did so because he refused Kublai Khan’s request and demand for Kertanegara to “bow down” and be loyal to Khan’s authority and power by paying “loyalty taxes” (*upeti*). Ultimately, the expedition failed after they were outwitted by Raden Wijaya, who later established the Majapahit kingdom.

The connection between early Chinese Islam in Java and remnants of these Chinese–Mongol soldiers is not without basis. Jitsuo Kuwabara’s study shows that Muslim elites held significant influence during the Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty in China, and a substantial number of them held high-ranking positions (Kuwabara, 1928). According to Kuwabara, these Muslim elites influenced China–Mongol expansionist policies, not only to Java or Nusantara but also to Japan, Korea, and Champa. Some historians even record that the

deputy commander of the Chinese–Mongol army was a Muslim named Alaudin Musafari (Ma, 1967). This has led to a strong assumption that part of the China–Mongol army that invaded Java consisted of Chinese Muslims. The theory gains further support from later Javanese traditions along the island’s northern coast, which associate early Chinese Muslims with a land called “Munggul” (clearly referring to “Mongol”).

Furthermore, the most historically significant and monumental political event was certainly the expedition of Cheng Ho during the reign of Emperor Yung Lo (r. 1402-1424) of the Ming Dynasty, which involved thousands of Chinese participants, many of whom were Muslims. In addition to the legendary Cheng Ho, several high-ranking figures of the expedition—such as Ma Huan, Ha San, Wang Ching-hung, Kung Wu Ping, Fei Hsin, and others—were also known to be devout Muslims (Zhi, 1996).

The expedition led by the great navigator Cheng Ho was not merely political and economic in nature but also carried a sort of “hidden agenda” of Islamization, as indicated by the placement of Muslim Chinese consuls and emissaries in every region he visited (Muljana, 1969). It is possible that some of the Chinese Muslims who joined Cheng Ho’s entourage were unwilling to return to their homeland—either due to business opportunities in new, more promising regions, political comfort, or religious motivation to spread the message of Islam in “non-Muslim lands.” The historical footprints left by Cheng Ho are strongly felt in the life of Javanese society, not only appearing through oral traditions in the mythical figure of Kyai Dampuwang, but also through several historical relics such as the lighthouse in Cirebon and various ancient temples along the northern coast of Java associated with Cheng Ho.

These Chinese immigrants, most of whom were men, then married local women—either noblewomen from the royal courts or commoners—as in the case of a Chinese Muslim who, according to local tradition, became known as “Babah China” and married a *ronggeng* dancer in Sunda Kelapa. From these intermarriages, the term *China Peranakan* emerged as a counterpart to *China Totok*. The fact that most Chinese migrants were men was due to the custom and imperial prohibition at the time that prevented women from traveling far, especially overseas. The term “*nyonya* China,” which appeared in Java during the medieval period, actually referred to native women who married Chinese men. The word “*nyonya*” itself comes from the Hokkien word *nio’a* or *niowa*, meaning “woman” (Joe, 1933). This tradition of intermarriage between Chinese and Javanese in the precolonial era was so common that Javanese people once felt proud to identify themselves as descendants of the Chinese.

Many early observers testified to the strong Chinese identity among the Javanese, as noted by early foreign commentators and scholars, such as Diogo de Couto, Edmund Scott, William Methold, Schouten, and Abbé de

Raynal (Lombard, 1996). The famous Portuguese traveler, Tome Pires, also could not hide the fact of the harmonious relations between the Javanese (or people in Nusantara, more broadly) and the Chinese. In fact, Pires said that several Chinese rulers willingly sent one of their daughters to a Javanese vassal to be married, accompanied by many followers and a ship full of *kepeng* (coins) (Pires, 1944).

This tradition of intermarriage between the Chinese and the “native people” of Nusantara continued when Dutch colonialism arrived. Danys Lombard and Claudine Salmon have clearly shown several Chinese-Muslim *Peranakan* figures during the colonial period in Java.

### ***Proposing “Chinese Theory” in the Islamization of Nusantara***

The previous description provides a strong basis to state that the Chinese Muslim community also played a role in the historical process of Islamization in Nusantara, thus justifying the “Chinese Theory” in the history of the arrival and development of Islam in this archipelago. So far, discussions on the Islamization of the Malay–Indonesian world have largely revolved around two established paradigms: the Middle Eastern (Arab/Persian) theory and the Indian theory—both of which have become conventional, if not somewhat clichéd.

Proponents of the Arab/Middle Eastern theory include Crawfurd, Keijzer, Naimann, de Hollander, and several Indonesian–Malay historians, such as Hasjmi, al-Attas, HAMKA, Djajadiningrat, and Mukti Ali. Meanwhile, advocates of the Indian theory include Pijnapel, Hurgronje, Morison, Kern, Winstedt, Fatimi, Vlekke, Gonda, and Schrieke (Azra, 1999). Notably, almost no historian has explicitly argued that Islamization in Nusantara originated from China. Yet both the Indian and the Middle Eastern (especially Hadrami–Arab) theories are not without their weaknesses.

Supporters of the Indian theory often rely on speculative arguments—for example, the claim that the multi-tiered roofs of classical Javanese mosques resemble the *meru* structure of Hindu temples, suggesting an Indian architectural influence. The Arab–Hadramaut theory, however, is even less convincing. In his study *Le Hadhramout et les Colonies Arabes dans l’Archipel Indien* (“Hadramaut and the Arab Colonies in the Indonesian Archipelago”), van den Berg argued that the *sayyid*, *sharif*, and other Hadrami Arabs only began to establish a visible presence in Java toward the late eighteenth century—long after the process of Islamization had begun in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries or even before this period. Arab settlements in Java only became permanent after 1820, and large-scale Hadrami migration to the archipelago occurred after 1870, facilitated by steamship technology (Berg, 1989; 1955).

This timeline contrasts sharply with the historical evidence of Chinese Muslim communities that had already inhabited coastal areas of Java, Sumatra, Bali, and other regions in Nusantara long before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Therefore, the history of Islamization in Nusantara must be reconstructed, and the Chinese role in introducing Islam cannot be simply ignored. Political and ideological biases should not obscure or erase the contribution of Chinese Muslims to historical memory.

### **Conclusion**

Although anti-Chinese sentiments first emerged during the Dutch colonial rule, the dark side of Chinese communities in Indonesia reached its peak during the Suharto era. Suharto proclaimed China as the “mastermind” behind the Indonesian Communist Party, followed by killings, massacres, and exterminations of anything related to the Chinese. During Suharto’s reign (r. 1966-1998), all forms of cultural production associated with China were dissolved, including intellectual works that discussed the historicity of China and its various contributions, such as Muljana’s book *Runtuhnya Keradjaan Hindu-Djawa dan Timbulnja Negara-negara Islam di Nusantara* (“the Decline of Javanese-Hindu Kingdom and the Emergence of Islamic States in Nusantara”), banned by the Attorney General’s Decree No. Kep. 043/DA/1971.

In conclusion, history must be revealed truthfully, including the history of Islamization in Nusantara. Hatred toward the Chinese and China must not lead to the erasure of the historical, cultural, and archeological legacies they, including Cheng Ho and Chinese Muslims, once inscribed. It must be acknowledged that China does not solely bear the faces of Buddhism or Confucianism, but also that of Islam. Indeed, long before the Arabs reached Nusantara, Chinese Muslims had already established themselves as an influential middle class and played a central role in introducing Islam in the archipelago. This deserves to be appreciated with honesty, and the truth about the legacy of Cheng Ho and Chinese Muslims cannot be denied. After all, isn’t that a great nation is nation that dares to acknowledge the full existence of its own history?

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