



Islam Nusantara: *Journal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture*, 07 (1), 2026: 1-6
E-ISSN: 2722-8975
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47776/islamnusantara.v7i1>

Historical Trajectories of Sino–Nusantara Relations

Ahmad Suaedy

Fariz Alnizar

Muhammad Hasan Basri

Idris Masudi*

email: journalislamnusantara@unusia.ac.id

*correspondence author

Abstract

This 2025 special issue of *Islam Nusantara: Journal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture*, collaboratively organized with the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum, presents a multidisciplinary exploration of the historical and contemporary dimensions of Sino-Nusantara relations. Through five thematic lenses, maritime routes, Islamization, artistic heritage, culinary history, and geopolitical dynamics, the featured articles employ diverse methodologies ranging from ethnography and historiography to international relations theory. Collectively, they challenge reductionist narratives by highlighting the integral role of Chinese Muslim communities, the hybridity of cultural expressions, and the enduring legacy of inter-civilizational encounters. The issue reframes Islam Nusantara as a product of layered, continuous negotiation, demonstrating how historical connectivity informs both cultural identity and modern geopolitical frameworks. Ultimately, it advocates for an adaptive, inclusive understanding of this shared past to envision more cooperative futures.

Keywords:

Culinary history, Cultural Hybridity, Islam Nusantara, Sino-Nusantara Relations, Zheng He (Cheng Ho)

Abstrak

Edisi khusus Islam Nusantara: *Journal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture* tahun 2025 berkolaborasi dengan Cheng Ho



Author correspondence email: journalislamnusantara@unusia.ac.id

Available online at:

Copyright (c) 2026 by **Islam Nusantara: Journal for the Study of Islamic History and Culture**



Cultural Museum ini menyajikan eksplorasi multidisiplin mengenai dimensi historis dan kontemporer hubungan Sino-Nusantara. Melalui lima lensa tematik: rute maritim, Islamisasi, warisan artistik, sejarah kuliner, dan dinamika geopolitik, artikel-artikel yang terpilih menggunakan metodologi beragam, mulai dari etnografi dan historiografi hingga teori hubungan internasional. Secara kolektif, mereka menantang narasi reduksionis dengan menyoroti peran integral komunitas Muslim Tionghoa, keberagaman ekspresi budaya, dan warisan abadi dari pertemuan antarbudaya. Isu ini membingkai ulang Islam Nusantara sebagai hasil dari negosiasi budaya yang berlapis dan berkelanjutan, menunjukkan bagaimana keterhubungan historis membentuk identitas budaya sekaligus kerangka geopolitik modern. Pada akhirnya, edisi ini menganjurkan pemahaman yang adaptif dan inklusif atas masa lalu bersama untuk membayangkan masa depan yang lebih kooperatif.

Kata Kunci:

Hibriditas Budaya, Hubungan Tiongkok-Nusantara, Islam Nusantara, Sejarah Kuliner, Zheng He (Cheng Ho)

The relationship between China and the Nusantara has long constituted a dynamic field of interaction, stretching across centuries through maritime routes, the spice trade, cultural diplomacy, migration, and the dissemination of religion. Amid the currents of globalization and the acceleration of digital transformation, which increasingly intensify the mobility of people and ideas, historical inquiries into Sino–Nusantara relations have found renewed relevance. Such inquiries do not merely reopen archives of the past; they enrich our collective capacity to understand how inter-civilizational encounters shaped identities, technologies, aesthetics, and religious practices across the region.

This 2025 special issue, organized in collaboration with the Cheng Ho Cultural Museum in Melaka, aims to offer a multidisciplinary reading of this broad and enduring theme. The special issue is designed to explore five major landscapes of inquiry: (1) maritime routes and the expeditions of Zheng He; (2) the history of maritime Islam; (3) artistic and technological heritage within the Silk and Spice Road networks; (4) the culinary history of Sino–Nusantara

interactions; and (5) the acculturation of Chinese traditions within Islam Nusantara.

The five articles featured in this issue not only represent these subthemes but also expand the analytical horizon with approaches drawn from history, ethnography, culinary studies, performing arts, and international relations. Together, they provide readers with a comprehensive picture of how Sino–Nusantara relations have operated across local, regional, and geopolitical scales.

Performing Arts as a Living Archive of Sino–Persian–Islamic Hybridity

The opening article by Kathy Foley, “The Wali, the Woman, the Lion: Pasisir Performance and Chinese and Persianate Islam on Jawa,” introduces a rarely explored dimension in the study of Sino–Nusantara relations: performing arts as markers of history and vessels of cultural transmission. Foley demonstrates that Chinese and Persian influences are inscribed not only in chronicles or trade records, but live within aesthetic patterns and narratives still performed today—from *wayang golek* to tales of the Wali Songo, and lion imagery in circumcision rituals.

This article is especially valuable for the subthemes “Islam Nusantara and Chinese Traditions” and “History of Arts and Technology on the Spice and Silk Road.” Foley argues that performing arts function as *living archives* storing layers of Sufi, Shi‘a, Chinese, and Persian contacts. Her central argument suggests that the hybridity of Islam Nusantara finds its most authentic expression in the aesthetic realm: not as remnants of the past but as performances continuously transformed despite pressures from religious puritanism.

The article enriches ongoing discussions on Islam Nusantara by framing it not as a static entity insulated from external influences, but as the product of long, layered, and continually renegotiated cultural encounters.

Zheng He and the Plural Genealogy of Islam Nusantara

The second article, “Sino-Indo Muslim Cultures: Tracing the History and Legacy of Cheng Ho and Chinese Muslims in Nusantara” by Sumanto Al Qurtuby, offers a fresh historical reading of the role of Zheng He and Chinese Muslim communities in the development of Islam in the region. The article proposes an epistemic revision to prevailing theories of Islamization, often dominated by Arab or Indian narratives, by demonstrating that Chinese Muslim scholars, merchants, and communities played significant roles long before European colonialism.

Sumanto’s intervention challenges the reductionist treatment of Islam Nusantara as a singular historical trajectory. By examining historical evidence

from Java, ranging from trade networks and diplomacy to architecture, he asserts that the “Chinese theory” is not merely an alternative explanation but an integral component of the genealogical formation of Islam Nusantara.

Within the objectives of this special issue, the article contributes significantly to revitalizing discourse surrounding China’s civilizational contributions to the shaping of Islam Nusantara. It not only adds new historical layers but also broadens the theoretical horizon for understanding Islam as a product of complex cultural journeys.

Asian Maritime Heritage and the Framework of Inter-Civilizational Peace

The third article, “From Asian Maritime Cultural Routes to Peace: the View of Zheng He Cultural Route Heritage” by Li Pei Feng, presents a transregional perspective linking Asian maritime routes to the cultivation of cultures of peace. Through case studies in Melaka and Semarang, the article illustrates how Southeast Asian sailing routes were not merely trade corridors but nodes of inter-civilizational encounters that facilitated transfers of religion, technology, art, and diplomacy.

Li’s analysis is particularly relevant to the subthemes “Cheng Ho, Maritime Routes, Silk and Spices” and “History of Arts and Technology on the Spice and Silk Road.” He emphasizes that Asian maritime routes constituted a dynamic cultural ecology characterized by dialogical rather than unidirectional exchanges. Archaeological traces and intangible traditions left behind are not simply relics of the past but valuable resources for contemporary efforts to build frameworks for peace and regional cooperation.

The article’s critical contribution lies in linking maritime history with modern issues such as cultural diplomacy, heritage tourism, and Asian integration—drawing history from the past into the future as a foundation for imagining a more cooperative region.

Cuisine as a Trace of Diaspora and Cultural Negotiation

Ary Budiyo’s article, “From Tiao Wan (跳丸) to Bakwan (肉丸) and Bakso (肉酥): The Culinary History of Chaoshan Peranakan Cuisine in Java,” offers a unique approach combining culinary historiography with autoethnography. Through historical reconstruction and personal memory, Ary shows how *bakso*—especially *bakwan Malang*—has undergone a long journey from Chaoshan culinary traditions to local adaptations in Java, mediated by trade routes, migration, and negotiations surrounding halal dietary expectations.

This article strongly supports the subtheme “History of Nusantara and Chinese Culinary.” Ary demonstrates that food serves as one of the most flexible mediums of cultural acculturation. Cuisine functions as a meeting

point between diasporic identity, religious adaptation, and local tastes. Methodologically, the article exemplifies how culinary history can be written not only from textual sources but also through embodied memory and sensory experience.

More broadly, the study illustrates how Chinese culinary heritage has shaped Java’s gastronomic landscape while influencing local social and economic dynamics. Within the context of Islam Nusantara, cuisine emerges as a bridge capable of dissolving ethnic and religious boundaries.

Asymmetric Indonesia–China Relations and the Neo-Tributary Lens

The closing article by Virдика Rizky Utama and Mukhtar Abdullah, “Neo-Tributary in Modern Perspective: Tracing the Evolution of the Indonesia–China Partnership,” shifts the focus from historical and cultural interactions to contemporary geopolitical dynamics. Employing a historical-conceptual approach, the authors interpret Indonesia–China relations as increasingly exhibiting neo-tributary patterns, especially concerning foreign investment and economic dependency.

As the only contribution grounded in international relations, the article offers valuable insights into the continuities between ancient tributary systems and modern economic–political arrangements. It cautions that asymmetric relations may affect Indonesia’s strategic positioning within the broader Asian geopolitical landscape.

This article is crucial for the special issue because it connects the centuries-long history of Sino–Nusantara relations with their contemporary implications. It ensures that the issue does not remain in historical nostalgia but provides analytical grounding for understanding today’s geopolitical challenges.

Conclusion: Cultivating Memory, Broadening Horizons

The five articles in this special issue collectively demonstrate that Sino–Nusantara relations constitute a vast, layered, and richly textured field of study. From performing arts to diplomacy, from traditional cuisine to theories of Islamization, and from maritime archaeology to contemporary geopolitics, each contribution reveals interwoven relationships that transcend disciplinary and temporal boundaries.

Tracing the past of Sino–Nusantara relations is not an exercise in romanticizing history but an intellectual effort to revisit the cultural roots that shape us today. In an increasingly interconnected world, a deeper understanding of this long history of connectivity enables us to formulate models of coexistence that are more adaptive, inclusive, and future-oriented.

Editorial Introduction

As editors, we hope that this special issue not only enriches academic scholarship but also serves as an entry point for further research that is bolder, more interdisciplinary, and more reflective of the long trajectories binding China and the Nusantara. May our engagement with the past broaden the horizons with which we face our shared future.