

# Chinatown in Semarang: Cultural Environment and Peaces Narrative

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**Abstract.** People's opinions on the Chinese are still limited to the groups of people who are oriented to economic affairs only, i.e. economic animals. Such a view often creates negative prejudice towards them. In fact, the Chinese people have quite diverse cultural wealth. Historically, cultural diversity can actually be a tool for inter-ethnic communication that can build a social integration. Based on the description above, the study aims to examine the cultural heritage of Chinese people and to find out how the social construction of society effects the cultural history of Chinese people. This study uses the historical approach to show the history of Chinese culture and the qualitative approach to show the social construction of society. The results of the study are 1) The Chinese people in Semarang's Chinatown are quite conservative in preserving and caring for their cultural environment, the conservative attitude is influenced by their belief in FengShui; and 2) The social construction of Chinese people towards their culture is quite positive, it shows the aspects of humanism and Indonesianity. They consider that their traditions are a part of Indonesia's cultural wealth, not merely a symbol of Chinese ethnicity or an ethnic exclusivity. The implication of the study is that, the prejudices and stereotypes about ethnic Chinese are built politically through some policies and they are structurally controlled, so the people must not instill hatred of other ethnicities. It is necessary to be humanist to create a peaceful and non-threatening atmosphere.

**Keywords:** History, Culture, Social Construction, Chinese

## 1. Introduction

The problem of prejudice becomes an obstacle to the emergence of harmonization among people [1], [2]. This prejudice still happens and stays strong in the interaction of Chinese-Javanese people [3], [4]. This case can be classified as a comprehensive problem in every part of Indonesia [5]. This conflict drags some issues related to human feelings and even ideas. Both Chinese and Javanese people maintain the stereotypes that have an impact on the growth of hatred among these ethnic groups [6], [7]. This research reveals how the Chinese people lives in Semarang, considering that there is a Chinatown in that city as a residence for the Chinese [8]. The important aspect of this research is the problem of prejudice, cultural environment, and social construction of the Chinese people related to historical and cultural heritage of their ancestors in Indonesia. To answer this problem, the research questions are as follows: 1) How is the culture and environment of the Chinese people in Semarang? and 2) How is the social construction of the people regarding Chinese culture in Semarang? This research provides a contibution of ideas about the harmony of multicultural society.

## 2. Research Method

The study is done by using qualitative method with phenomenological framework. The phenomena that become the focus of this study are the cultural process in forming the population of Semarang's Chinatown as well as the social life of the people in Semarang's Chinatown. There are 8 informants in this study who were divided into 2 categories: *Totok* and *Peranakan*. *Totok* is the term for migrants (and their descendants) who continue to keep their native language and culture. While *Peranakan* are those who have been assimilated into the local language and culture. The element of Chinese culture in Semarang's Chinatown is still very strong, but uniquely, the Chinese people who live there also respect the Javanese culture so well. The research data were obtained through participatory observation and interviews. The data analysis of the study uses an interactive model.

## 3. Result and Discussion

The results of this study have been mapped according to the focus of the study, i.e. regarding cultural heritage in the environment of Chinese people in Semarang and the social construction of Chinese people about their own culture. These also emphasizes the relationship that occurs between the Chinese people and the environment as well as with other ethnic groups in Semarang. The results are as follows:

Chinatown (Indonesian: *Pecinan*) is a unique region in Indonesia. This environment is mostly inhabited by Chinese migrants who later merge into Indonesian citizens through a long process of struggle. Historical evidence that can be found from the process of forming the Chinese identity in Semarang is the Chinese Temple (Indonesian: *Kelenteng*), or the place of worship of Chinese in Semarang. The Chinese temple is also a marker of Semarang's Chinatown, which differentiates this area with the other regions of Semarang such as Kampung Arab (Arabs village), Kampung Melayu (Malay village), and Kampung Jawa (Javanese village). The writer has identified the Chinese temples in Semarang's Chinatown. One of the temples in the Chinatown is the Hoo Hok Bio Temple which was built in 1753 and located on Wotgandul Timur Street. This temple is the oldest Chinese temple in Semarang's Chinatown. While the largest Chinese temple in Chinatown area is Wie Wie Kiong located on Sebandaran Street. This temple is unique because of a human statue whose shape is influenced by European architecture. The main temple in the Chinatown area is Tay Kak Sie Temple which is located in Gang Lombok. This temple is a monument of Chinese people's resistance to colonialism. In addition to the three temples as mentioned above, there are still seven other Chinese temples in Semarang's Chinatown, they are Tik Soe, Tong Pek Bio, Liong Tek Hay Bio, Ling Hok Bio, See Hoo Kong, Wie Wie Kiong, and Grajen Chinese Temple. One temple is located outside Chinatown, namely Sam Po Khong Temple, which is in Batu Building and it is visited by interfaith communities. Sam Po Khong Temple keeps Cheng Ho's legend which is believed to hold the rudder and anchor of Cheng Ho's ship which were used when he was sailing to Java Island in the early 15th century.

The Semarang's Chinatown has an important meaning in Semarang history. In historical perspective, the Chinatown is politically a symbol of Chinese people's resistance to the Dutch colonialism. The emergence of Chinatown area is a result of the political conflict between Chinese people and the Dutch. Informant 1 gave an explanation that:

“It was started from the Chinese's uprising in the Batavia area in 1740 against the Dutch

Company. The rebellion was foiled by the Dutch in 1743. Furthermore, as a preventive action and a form of Dutch fear of the Chinese, the Dutch then moved Chinese people living in Semarang.”

Chinese people who originally lived in the Gedong Batu area were moved to the area which is now called Chinatown. According to Informant 2, the aim of this action is that:

“The Dutch could easily monitor or control the activities of Chinese people. The place was chosen because it was close to the Tangsi Military, owned by the Dutch, which is located on Jl. KH. Agus Salim or Jurnatan.”

In later development, the Chinatown becomes the trade center and services for Chinese people. The Chinatown of Semarang has very strong economic, social and cultural potential. There are three routine activities carried out in the Chinatown area. These activities include trading activities at the Gang Baru traditional market. It is called Gang Baru market because it is located on Gang Baru, between Wotgandul Street and Gang Warung Street. The traditional market for Gang Baru market starts from 05.00 until it is done. Other activity is culinary tourism, commonly called Semawis stalls. In this culinary tour, we can get a variety of foods and beverages sold along the Gang Warung Street which takes place every Friday, Saturday and Sunday starting in the afternoon around 6:00 p.m. until it ends. In addition to daily and weekly activities, there is also an annual activity called Semawis Lunar Market. This activity is an annual tourism agenda in the city of Semarang and it is held for 3 days in order to welcome the Chinese New Year. In addition, there is also Barongsai celebration which is native culture from China. The Barongsai celebration is started again in the New Order post. This celebration shows the identity of the Indonesian Chinese community. In the period before the New Order, the culture had been banned along with the prohibition of giving Chinese names to Indonesians.

After mapped the social life and cultural heritage in the environment of Semarang's Chinatown, then the data of the Chinese people's social construction about the Chinese culture in Semarang were presented. The field studies show that some Chinese ethnics construct their socio-cultural identities as part of Indonesian culture. The construction of the socio-cultural identity was built based on their own views so far that they, as Chinese ethnics, are basically the same as other ethnic groups in Indonesia (Humanism). Based on Informant 3:

“There is no acceptable and logical reason that shows ethnic Chinese as "Other Ethnic" so they could be discriminated. According to Informant 3, everything about ethnic Chinese, either the language, culture, religion, clothing or the food taste, is part of the cultural diversity that is owned by Indonesia. It is not otherwise seen as a difference”.

Informant II gave a supporting explanation that:

“I was born in Indonesia and I studied in Indonesia. There is no difference with a neighbor who come from Java, or wherever it is. Indeed, my family is a Chinese and has a culture from my *engkong*, my ancestors. But, it is normal. All people have their own culture, but it does not mean that we are different with different culture. Even some of my family are half-breed. Some are married to Javanese and some are married to Betawi people”.

Based on the statement above, if what is inherent in ethnic Chinese is seen as a diversity,

the impact that occurs in daily life is the emergence of prejudice and stigma that leads to conflict. This social construction is based on their belief that there is no nation or state that stands on the same culture. All nations and countries always stand on cultural diversity. It is supported by Informant 4 that:

“What is inherent in ethnic Chinese, whether it is clothing, culture or belief, is not a barrier to coexist. These differences are a reality that must be well received. The real problem is why ethnic Chinese cannot be fully accepted by society. It is because ethnic Chinese are still considered as immigrants even though they were born and raised in Indonesia, only the history of their ancestors from China. If they have identities and cultures that are different from other ethnic groups, it does not mean they are different. They have similarities as Indonesian people who have the same rights and obligations”.

Cultural and identity differences are cultural properties possessed by Indonesia. The tradition in Chinatown Semarang is also a type of culture that characterizes Chinese people in Indonesia. It certainly needs a direct clarification from the Informant, as Informant 6 said: "I find Chinese culture in Indonesia as part of the Nusantara (Indonesia) culture, before becoming Indonesia we have practiced such culture". It is also supported by Informant 7: "Not only showing its existence, Chinese culture in Indonesia becomes the part of cultural wealth". According to Informant 8:

“Humanity must be upheld in seeing such diversity, often the Chinese people become victims of the political situation, which makes it a prolonged sentiment. But fundamentally, we, as Chinese people, do not have hatred with brothers and sisters from other ethnic or religious groups.”

Chinese society has a positive tendency in building social harmony. It is indicated by the opinions that have been mentioned, the cultural environment in Chinatown is quite conducive and supports the ‘multi-culturality’. It becomes the priority of this study. Another important finding is that Chinese people have a humanistic nature in the context of social relations. The sentiments that exist toward them do not make them aggressive towards other groups. This is a concrete example that can be disseminated as positive information to give messages and narratives of peace to the wider community who are still contaminated by racism and social discrimination in their lives.

This study supports the opinion of Fan and Suryadinata, who stated that Chinese culture in Indonesia was shown not merely to show the ethnic Chinese ego[9][10]. Cultural performances are usually used to perform a ritual and to convey certain messages, such as the Barongsai (Lion Dance) which aims to show the character of Chinese as civilized people and to respect for their ancestral culture. Beyond that, Chinese people in Semarang’s Chinatown are able to maintain their cultural environment. Considering that Chinese people strongly believe in the concept of FengShui, i.e. an ancient topography from China that believes in how humans, heaven (astronomy) and earth (geography) can live in harmony to help improve our life by accepting Positive Qi[11]–[13]. Those beliefs that make the cultural environment in Chinatown long lasting. It is proved by the existence of Chinese temples in Semarang’s Chinatown that still survive with its original form. It also confirms that this study supports the opinion of Lan and Benite, that the Chinese people are conservative. It supports their character as a cultured person and also makes them always appear more exclusive when they

are compared to other communities, because the culture and religion which they embrace will be practiced routinely and not half-heartedly, every celebration is performed very lively [14], [15]. Those, what makes the cultural environment in Semarang's Chinatown longlasting and sustainable until today.

This study reinforces Suryadinata's argument about pluralism initiated by the Chinese people. As explorers, ethnic Chinese are very adaptive to the environment they visit, they are able to adapt quickly to the people they have just met [16]. So the assumption about Chinese people who are considered to be the exclusive ethnic is a big mistake. The study also reinforces Widiastuti's opinion that the exclusivity of Chinese people is caused by the previous political policies that corner their position among the Indonesian people, it makes them feel that they are always threatened, so they choose not to be careless in social relations [17]. Pecinan Semarang sendiri merupakan pertemuan budaya, yang membongkar persepsi lama tentang eksklusifitas masyarakat China. Semarang's Chinatown itself is a form of cultural mixing, which unravels the old perceptions about the exclusivity of Chinese people. Kasus di Pasar Semawis, masyarakat China, Jawa, Arab, dan etnis lain hidup rukun dalam sebuah komunitas jual-beli. In Semawis Market; Chinese, Javanese, Arabs, and other ethnic groups live in harmony as a trading community. The visitors of the market come from various parts of Indonesia. It becomes a symbol of solidarity of Semarang people as well as an icon of Semarang's Chinatown. Hal itu menunjukkan bahwa sebenarnya masyarakat China memiliki sifat yang cukup terbuka, It shows that, actually, Chinese people have a fairly open character. An ethnic sentiment, racism, and discrimination are only political products and they are structurally controlled. Although the Chinese people tends to be passive, but they are quite politically aware and they have a strong sense of belonging towards their culture, there is no difference between *Peranakan* and *Totok*.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Chinese people in Semarang's Chinatown are tolerant and have a great love for their ancestral culture. Nevertheless, the culture of their ancestors was not a symbol of ethnic exclusivity, even they look at their existing traditions and rituals as the enrichment of Indonesian culture. The cultural environment in Semarang's Chinatown is still very well preserved because the Chinese people, through FengShui, are conservative in their nature and culture. The social construction of Chinese culture that is built is quite positive, the Chinese people always see an aspect of problem from a diverse perspective, so they do not act aggressively when they are cornered. They see that the cultural heritage in Chinatown is not the property of the Chinese Republic, but it belongs to the Indonesian people who, based on equality, can be used by anyone. Regarding the ethnic prejudices and sentiments, the Chinese people think about such problems openly which also shows that the people of Semarang's Chinatown are quite rational and they have political awareness. They think that the conflicts and sentiments among ethnic groups are caused by the politics and policy, so that the people here are only victims, both haters and hated. Actually, the most important thing in relationship harmony among the people is humanism. The people of Semarang's Chinatown are humanist enough to face every problem that plagues and engulfs them as part of ethnic groups of Indonesia.

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