Is Chinese Indonesian a Problem?

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Abstract. This study aims to examine the problematic characteristics of present research approaches for modern Chinese studies in Indonesia. Notable is the fact that scholars have utilised diverse, broad, and intricate research resources in their studies on Chinese Indonesians. Therefore, a comprehensive examination of all research conducted on Chinese Indonesian is both challenging and impossible. Consequently, a critical-exploratory technique was chosen by doing a close reading of purposely selected texts, particularly those focusing on issues relating to the political and economic elements of identity (ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic). Existing research has a tendency to prematurely conclude and conceal the investigation's subject in terms of ethnicity and minority status. In order to analyse Chinese studies in Indonesia, this evaluation will introduce Cultural Studies as an approach that allows for open-ended and tentative formulation.

Keywords: Chinese Indonesian, ethnicity, minority, Cultural Studies.

1 Introduction

The question "who is Chinese?"[1], which has been the subject of several inquiries in modern Indonesia, may be denotatively and simply aimed at the Chinese community in our immediate vicinity. Is it feasible, however, to describe Chinese society in Indonesia "as it is" without a preconceived notion? In the preface to a collection of works on contemporary China in Indonesia, Siew-Min Sai and Chang-Yau Hoon provided the following description.

> Constituting between 2 and 3 percent of Indonesia's total population, Chinese Indonesians form a heterogeneous ethnic community (Suryadinata, Arifin and Ananta 2003; Mackie 2005). They are but one out of more than 300 ethnic groups in a country that has celebrated its ethnic diversity by

[1]In Indonesia, the term "Tionghoa" has replaced "Cina" in official usage. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) issued Presidential Decree No. 12 of 2014 about the repeal of Ampera Cabinet Presidium Circular No. SE-06/Pred.Kab/6/1967, dated June 28, 1967. By means of this presidential decree, President SBY substituted the name "Cina" for "Tionghoa." In this study, the term of Chinese (*Cina*) is still used because it is easier, but it does not have any of the social or cultural meanings that the Chinese term does in contemporary Indonesia.

ISCS 2022, November 09-10, Malang, Indonesia

DOI 10.4108/eai.9-11-2022.2329436

> adopting, since its independence in 1945, the official motto of "Unity in Diversity" (Ind.: Bhinneka Tunggal lka). Despite such a motto, Chinese Indonesians do not possess the same status as other ethnic community groups who are perceived as "native" (Ind.: asli/pribumi) to Indonesia. A long history of Chinese migration to Indonesia beginning from pre-colonial times appears to condemn this ethnic community to the permanent status of "essential outsiders" (Chirot and Reid 1997), a popular idea expressed through labelling Chinese Indonesians as "non-natives" (Ind.: non-pribumi). As Aguilar's perceptive remarks on the hidden racialized logic of Indonesia's thinking about its territorial space suggest, "the Chinese are attributed a definite and knowable place of origin - China - and a first set of ancestors from 'outside' who first set foot on 'Indonesia.' With a focus on the past and the many first landings that the past is made to hold, the descendants (keturunan) are indelibly linked to the first-generation immigrants and, in an unbroken chain, remain forever aliens" (Aguilar 2001: 517) [1].

The Indonesian public are clearly not unfamiliar with the usage of the keyword ethnic diversity, in particular the placing of the Chinese in a minority position. Orientation to the dichotomous distinction between "native/non-native", "indigenous/foreign", and "pure/half-blood" is the prefix that emerges most frequently in public discourse or previous research. This model is also the most prevalent topic of conversation across a variety of occasions and platforms. Above all, however, through this study we shall pose that the way a story is described or told (the "narrative form") is not given. Instead, we might argue it comes from a frame of reference that is accepted, then, becomes common knowledge for imagining the term of Chinese Indonesian.

What should the initial focus of a critical analysis be? Is it possible and important for Indonesia to build a more authentic, pure, and natural picture of current Chinese society? In essence, we will argue that such attempts would be fruitless. Attempts to create a definitive account typically decrease complexity because they frequently seek the essence of Chinese society in Indonesia, which never existed. Which issues, if any, are subject to this assessment if a reversal is not feasible?

First, we departed from an argument that an attempt to generate a final explanation often imposes conceptual restrictions that make it impossible to deal with the complexities occurring on the ground, resulting in the elimination of facts that do not fit or match. Abidin Kusno, an Indonesian expat of Chinese descent, begins a conversation with a joke about the difficulty of self-definition.

> I have been interested in issues around ethnic Chinese less as an expert on the subject, but more as a person of whom journalists today would call, unambiguously, “ethnic Chinese.” Friends in Indonesia, however, are less certain about the term. We have been poking fun at each other that we are not only “ethnic Chinese” but also “confused (not Confucian) ethnic Chinese” – perhaps one that is regarded in Javanese slang as “*Cino wurung, Jowo tanggung, Londo pun durung*” (no-longer Chinese, not-quite Javanese, and not-yet Dutch). Some scholars would probably conceptualize us as peranakan, or better, “confused peranakan” – those who were born locally but not sure if his or her first language is Indonesian or a Chinese dialect, as they are often spoken at the same time [2].

So, if the goal of the research is to find patterns, structures, or systems that can be used in general, the ambiguous, overlapping, and fluid position of Chinese Indonesian will be rendered irrelevant.

Second, we attempt to realign Chinese studies in contemporary Indonesia towards a more open and context-sensitive approach. In so doing, Cultural Studies will serve as the conceptual foundation for this investigation. The argument is not that Cultural Studies is superior to the previous method, but rather that this field of research enables more thoughtful investigation. It is neither hierarchical nor evolutionary, but it should use the best of traditional scholarship and its merit of “significant others”[3].

In this sense, the choice was made to conduct the evaluation via the lens of Cultural Studies so as to permit recuperative actions with regard to the concept or term of ethnic identity in the prior research. Clearly, the purpose is not to adopt a Cultural Studies as it is to examine Chinese studies in Indonesia. Rather, the purpose is to evaluate the contribution of identity studies in Cultural Studies could make to answering the remaining concerns.

Based on the aforementioned issues, this review will pose the following questions: (1) what is the most prevalent model in cultural, literary, and media studies for describing the Chinese population in Indonesia? When and under what circumstances will China appear? To accomplish what goal and answer what questions? (2) What conceptual issues pertaining to the understanding of Chinese identity in modern Indonesia have been overlooked by previous research approaches?

2 Confusing Chinese as Problem in Modern Indonesia

Who contends that Chinese Indonesian is a problem for contemporary Indonesia, and why? In 1991, for example, a symposium at Cornell University in the United States titled "The Role of Indonesian Chinese in Shaping Indonesian Modern Life" featured talks that viewed the Chinese population in modern Indonesia as a "problem." Leonard Blusse, one of the conference's organisers, retrospectively rephrased the conference's purpose by re-articulating a neologism of the New Order in 1967, the term "Chinese problem," which is still frequently used today to describe the challenges of discussing the Chinese as a minority in Indonesia. The term "the Chinese problem" was coined because the majority of symposium attendees were unable to correctly respond to this new word.

The difficulties and complexity faced by these scholars, in fact, stem from their image of modern Indonesia as a state dominated by a non-Chinese majority (mainly Javanese and Malay), whereas Chinese Indonesians are migrants and immigrants from mainland China. They capture this predicament with the adage "foreigners but not foreign," which is the symposium's raison d'être.

> The motivation behind the symposium was to analyse how Chinese culture, as it was introduced by Chinese migrants throughout the centuries, converged with Indonesian culture . . . Despite the generations of shared history and cultural experiences, the Chinese Indonesians also think of themselves as a separate group. Wondering why this should be so and unable to formulate an adequate answer to this question, the organizers of the symposium committed themselves—a "demonic commitment" as John Wolff put it—to the creation of a platform where Chinese Indonesians from different walks of life—writers, filmmakers, politicians, businessmen, social scientists, and historians—would be given the opportunity to air their views on the issue free from any political connotations. The cultural identity and the position of the Chinese population group within Indonesian

> society is a contentious one. The *masalah Cina* (Chinese problem) issue has been hotly discussed within Indonesian society itself and has inevitably resulted in such crucial questions as whether the Indonesian Chinese are entitled to maintain their own cultural identity or should instead seek integration or even assimilation into Indonesian culture [4].

From this perspective, the "Chinese problem" cannot be resolved since it is difficult to determine the meaning and scope of Chinese's cultural identity in contemporary Indonesia.

It comes as no surprise. If we continue our investigation, we will be in a better position to clarify these subtleties. As a historical context, the “Chinese problem” corresponds to the notion of "culture" during the New Order (1966–1998). When the administration of President Suharto replaced the administration of President Sukarno, also known as the "Old Order," the administration of President Suharto vigorously advocated for the use of the new definitions of "national culture" and "art" in terms of the pinnacle of numerous indigenous ethnic groups in Indonesia. Culture and art are used as metaphors to explain Indonesia as a whole, with Javanese acting as the advanced example [5]. The cultural model and national identity of the New Order regime restricted and failed to create opportunities for the Chinese people, and it could be claimed that they tended to disregard their existence in this model of national cultural strategy. The cultural formulation of the New Order paradigm is static, univocal, but stressed via all channels of mediation, such that it is commonly considered as a natural phenomenon in the creation of the social dynamics of contemporary Indonesia.

In consequence, the common concern about the Chinese studies in contemporary Indonesia concentrates on the concept of cultural identity, in particular by showing Chinese exclusion in terms of ethnicity and minority status in Indonesia's nation-building process. The Chinese have been in Indonesia for centuries; they are present but not actual. In 2005, for instance, a researcher with Chinese descent reported this awkward situation while travelling with his family to the Miniature Park of Beautiful Indonesia in Jakarta.

> In late June 2005, my nephew and I visited the Miniature Park of Beautiful Indonesia, locally known as TMII (the abbreviation of the Indonesian name of the park, Taman Mini Indonesia Indah), in East Jakarta. TMII is a theme park that exhibits the diversity of various ethnic groups and cultures in Indonesia. The park's organisation is based on provinces in Indonesia. Hence, each province has a pavilion showcasing the culture of ethnic groups who live in the province. When we were in the East Java pavilion, I saw a Chinese family looking at the display and diorama. The son asked his father in Javanese, “Dad, why can’t we find the Chinese in the display? There are a lot of Chinese in East Java, aren’t there?” The father laughed and said in Javanese, “I don’t know.” The father did not think much about the absence of the Chinese, and neither did I. But after a while, the child’s question made me aware that the Chinese were conspicuously absent in the displays and dioramas in a number of pavilions I visited. In this pavilion, the pavilion of our home province, visitors can only see the Javanese and the Madurese, two major ethnic groups in the province. Even in West Kalimantan province, where the Chinese are one of the three major ethnic groups alongside the Dayak and Malay, no images of Chinese ethnic group could be found. The same situation was the case in all pavilions [6].

Prior to the fall of the New Order in 1998, Pamela Allen (2003) stated that "the issues experienced by Indonesian Chinese in post-colonial Indonesia tended to centre on the intersection of ethnicity, nationality, and identity, and how Chinese "differences" were perceived to contradict the notion of a nation-building endeavour." [7].

Nonetheless, the word "national or ethnic identity" in the context of Chinese Indonesians remains problematic even after the New Order collapsed in 1998. It relates to the prevalence of intellectual tradition. In Western academic circles, the concept of identity is philosophically founded in an individual's feature or profile, which is then extended to a group of persons in their social activities. In this definition, identity remains relatively unchanged, but it must adapt or develop to reach its full potential. This idea is consistent with the widely held belief that a nation-state evolved from a tribe. Since the nation-state may be the most successful paradigm for collective action, it overcomes individual identity in this circumstance. This thought is really potent. Despite the fall of the New Order in 1998, the majority of research on Chinese people in Indonesia continues to focus on nation-state development.

Another reason is that during the period of the New Order, the newly developed phrase "jati diri" (the true-self) was extensively processed and associated with the word "identity." Cultural Studies can contribute to the revitalization of the English word "identity," which demonstrates the incompatibility of "jati diri" and identity development in this discipline. "Identities are about leveraging the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not "who we are" or "where we came from," but rather "what we might become," "how we have been represented," and "how that relates to how we might represent ourselves" [8].

As the concept of identity in Cultural Studies is a product of discursive activity (power), this definition can take into consideration the historical and contextual components of identity development as opposed to considering identity as something natural (self) that is fundamentally given, immutable, and intimately related to a group of communities. Identity is not based on the physical or mental characteristics of a group of individuals. Instead, it is a political process that is determined by how they engage with one another. This view of identity in Cultural Studies allows for contradictions and divides and does not pretend to always be whole. In the case of Chinese society in modern Indonesia, we can observe not only differences based on ethnicity but also differences in gender relations, religion, race, political affiliation, and generations, so that an individual member of a community group can have multiple identities that may be conceptually or empirically viewed as conflicting with one another [9].

3 Reifying Chinese Indonesian into the Minority and Merchant

As previously indicated, the most prevalent paradigm for defining Chinese Indonesians links Chinese and minority positions in modern Indonesia. If we put "Indonesian Chinese minority" into the Google search bar, we will obtain approximately 552,000 pages relating to this topic. In the field, this minority's opinion (also based on surveys) is frequently expressed in terms of the difficulty of ethnic Chinese integration and becoming entirely Indonesian. The Jakarta Post Online editorial column, for example, says the following:

> Indonesia, a young nation, is not even 100 years old. Thousands of different ethnic groups living in the country have no doubts about their Indonesian identity, a recent survey indicates. There is one exception, however. The survey, conducted by the Indonesian Psychocultural Consortium (KPI), discovered that Chinese-Indonesians do not share this view. This, according to the consortium, could be for various reasons, including that some have lived through traumatic incidents - such as the 1998

> riots that targeted people of Chinese descent - and the discriminatory treatment the group has persistently faced [10].

Reciprocally, the perspective of non-Chinese (i.e., Muslim but not Chinese) upon individuals on Chinese society. Referring to the 2019 publication *Contentious Belonging: The Place of Minorities in Indonesia*, *Tempo Online Magazine* provides the following summary of this study's findings:

> 36 percent of Indonesian Muslims in 2018 said that the Chinese minority solely cared about their own ethnicity. 33 percent of the same group felt that Chinese culture was incompatible with Indonesian culture. There are also others who believe that the Chinese minority is still loyal to China, their native nation. This group reached 32% of the total population. In addition, 35% believe the ethnic Chinese minority to be selfish and ambitious [11] .

People with Chinese roots in Indonesia are supposed to live in a world with a thin layer of insecurity and a thick layer of native groups with deep roots.

Connecting Chinese Indonesians to the corporate operations of conglomerates is an additional prevalent structure. During the New Order, when the economy was centralised, a handful of Chinese-Indonesians became the richest people in Indonesia.

> Since the nationalization in 1957-1958 of the Dutch business enterprises that had dominated the colonial economy, including most of the country's largest plantations, mines, banks, and business houses, many Chinese firms previously confined to an intermediate position in the "colonial caste structure," as Wertheim has called it, have been able to advance to the topmost ranks in the present economic structure of Indonesia. Collectively, they now overshadow the previously dominant state sector made up largely of those nationalized enterprises. The two largest Chinese firms, Liem Sioe Liong's vast conglomerate and William Soeryadjaya's Astra Corporation, hold assets that were estimated to be worth Rp. 6.4 trillion and Rp. 2 trillion respectively (US$3.5 billion and $1.2 billion) in 1988, whereas ten others are in the $400-$700 million range and another one hundred or so exceed the $100 million mark. By any measure, international as well as local, the foremost of these men can aptly be called tycoons, "businessmen of extraordinary wealth and power," in the dictionary definition, whose wealth far exceeds that of their predecessors earlier in the century, Dutch as well as Chinese [12].

The question that arises is, what is the true role of these oligarchs? Are they merely passive victims of the state and Indonesian society as they exist today? Or might they also be considered regime members? Wu-Ling Chong's study shows that entrepreneurs (conglomerates) are not only being taken over, but they are also actively changing the "structure" of partnerships that are already in place.

> Some Chinese businesspeople have played in perpetuating corrupt business practices. As targets of extortion and corruption by bureaucratic officials and youth/crime organizations, Chinese businesspeople are not merely passive and powerless victims of corrupt practices [13].

What requires additional discussion? First, the Chinese Indonesians' commercial abilities are not inherent or natural. Second, the Chinese community is not always a victim but also a participant in governmental policies that do not always promote transparency and social justice for the entire Indonesian population.

If we accept that what we face is not a simple empirical reality, the definition of the phrase "representation" becomes significant and meaningful. Stuart Hall, a scholar who developed and advanced representation-related concepts, defined the phrase as follows:

> The word has a kind of double meaning, even in its common-sense understanding. It does mean “to present,” “to image,” ‘to depict” to offer a depiction of something else. And the word representation or representation does sort of carry with it the notion that something was there already and, through the media, has been represented. Nevertheless, this notion that somehow representation represents a meaning which is already there is a very common idea and, on the other hand, one of the ideas that I’m going to try to subvert.
>
> Well, now, this is a different situation. In a way, what we are saying now is that representation doesn’t really capture the process at all, because there was nothing absolutely fixed there in the first place to represent . . . Now, we’re talking about representation, not as an after-the-event activity; it means something and then the presentation might change or distort the meaning. We’re talking about the fact that it has no fixed meaning, no real meaning in the obvious sense, until it has been represented. And the representations – since they’re likely to be very different as you move from one person to another, one group or another, one part of society or another, one historical moment and another – just as those forms of representation will change, so the meaning of the event will change [14].

Representation is not just a deliberate or reflecting process of external reality; rather, representation is constitutive of the event.

What impact does Stuart Hall's concept of representation have on the study of Chinese Indonesian? At least two alternative outcomes exist. One could argue that the rules of the New Order era about taboos in the public arena, i.e., labelling as SARA (ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group) and national policies linked with "assimilation" for Chinese descendants, are more constitutive of what is known as Chinese than "defining" or "identifying" a real attribute of Chinese ethnicity. The nature of Chinese identity formation is shaped by and constrained by policies relevant to these two dimensions. The regime's efforts to differentiate Chinese society from the majority of Indonesian society are not designed to build their identity, but rather to strengthen the "identity model" of the indigenous Indonesians in tandem with China's eradication. Similarly, assimilation attempts are not an attempt at national integration but rather a tactic to develop a Chinese group as "the other" in order to establish the presumed indigenous identity. The depiction of China as an ethnic minority and foreigners who must be assimilated into a modern Indonesian state is not accurate; rather, it is the result of New Order-era social engineering.

Perhaps we can claim that the surveys, testimonials, and interviews in the aforementioned study are authentic records based on observations and experiences. The essential concern, however, is not the accuracy and trustworthiness of the data, but rather its underlying assumptions. Using this majority/minority dichotomy to analyse the data excludes a lot of other combinations that do not conform to the researcher's paradigmatic concept. As we have seen, scientific epistemology, which supports minority/majority confrontation theories, is significantly less empirical than one might assume [15], and contradictory experiences can always exist without challenging the paradigm as a whole.

So far, what conceptual gaps does the existing research leave? Specifically, the most evident faults challenge the underlying research assumptions. As previously said, the "Chinese

problem" is commonly associated with "ethnic minorities" and "seasoned businessmen." Typically, when conducting observations, researchers accept those qualities as facts, gathered in the field based on the reality experienced by the Chinese group, and not as a form of experiential description or interpretation. It is commonly forgotten that these findings are not merely factual but also a form of thought. R.G. Collingwood describes this attitude as "naive realism".

> In low-grade or unscientific thinking, we hardly know we are making any presuppositions at all. Because of their tangled condition, the thoughts which come up out of the bottom of our minds present a deceptive appearance of immediacy... And if I never think at all except in this quite casual and unscientific way, I shall always be content to believe this is all that knowledge can ever be: the simple "intuition" or "apprehension" of things confronting us which absolutely and in themselves just are what we "intuite" or "apprehend" them as being. This theory of knowledge is called realism; and realism is based upon the grandest foundation a philosophy can have, namely human stupidity. [16]

Intentionally or not, each researcher imbues each observation technique with a particular conceptual framework.

In the context of contemporary Chinese studies in Indonesia, the misconception of dichotomous classification generates difficulties or ambiguities in identifying examples that do not fit within the dichotomous framework when choosing the object of investigation. The research conducted by Hew Wai Weng (2018) about the Chinese Muslim exposes how difficult it has become to categorise Chinese Indonesians. Using just the available dichotomous classifications, the case of Chinese Muslims is only related to the "double minority," in which both "the Chinese" and "Chinese Muslims" are marginalised communities. Hew Wai Wang begins his research by arguing against the prevalent "essentialist" perspective. He makes use of Cultural Studies as an alternative to the existing methodological approach, allowing him to abandon the essentialist approach. In regards to Chinese Muslims, he argues that

> Chinese Muslims, who are engaging with two sets of competing identities in Indonesia, are extremely diverse. Thus, there is a dilemma here: how can we understand and make sense of these multifarious identities? Is there a distinctive Chinese Muslim culture in Indonesia? To answer these questions, I follow the approach of Brubaker (2004) that the study of ethnicity, race and nationalism should go beyond 'groupism', a tendency to reify 'ethnic groups' as 'internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes' (Brubaker 2004: 8). He advocates studying the way ethnicity works in social and political life without treating 'ethnic groups' as substantial entities, or even taking such groups as units of analysis at all. I borrow Brubaker's concept of 'ethnicity without group' to analyse Chinese Muslims, by analysing their complex identities without treating them as a bounded community. This analytical approach allows me to examine both the demarcation of Chinese Muslim cultural identity by community organisations and leaders, as well as the contestation of everyday identities among ordinary Chinese Muslims [17].

From the choice, the word "Chinese Muslims" is becoming a battleground, and it has the potential to foster new understanding.

Another concern that arises is the ambiguity and, sometimes, exclusion of the subject of analysis in relation to contemporary Chinese diverse communities. Failure to recognise the

analytical tools that facilitate transformation is a pervasive issue in a broad range of circumstances. There is a temptation for emancipatory research to attempt to validate the voices of the subjects. However, in this review, we argue that social science and humanities scholars must acknowledge that their work has always been subject to numerous interpretations than matter of facts.

> There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret because at bottom everything is already interpretation … Words themselves are nothing other than interpretations… one interprets, fundamentally, who has posed the interpretation [18].

The issue, then, is no longer whose interpretation is the most truthful and authentic (i.e., emic/ethic dichotomy), but rather that all ideas are tied to power relationships that determine who can or cannot speak.

What conclusions may be drawn about contemporary Chinese society if we accept the premise that the public space is a battleground? Again, using Hew Wai Weng's study, he states:

> The above-mentioned classifications indicate the heterogeneity of Chinese Muslim attitudes and behaviours, yet fail to address questions such as: Since both 'Islam' and 'Chinese' are plural realities with multiple meanings, which strain of Islam do they follow, and which aspects of Chinese cultures do they practise? Given that identity positioning can be strategic and flexible, can Chinese Muslims downplay or emphasise their Chinese and Islamic identities depending on conditions? Do their public manifestations of identity reflect their everyday practices? My analysis in this book goes beyond this typology to investigate the multifarious processes and divergent results of the encounters between and within Islamic and Chinese identities among Chinese Muslims [17].

The chance to shift from restrictive and abstract typological models enables his research to embrace the frequently occurring inconsistencies between concepts and empirical reality. Social science and humanities studies could obtain access to economic and political topics, which are frequently regarded as essential to daily living.

In short, the analytical approach of Cultural Studies enables one to see the process of transformation and how mediation applies to what the subject describes.

> Not only do we have a systematic, statistical model of information versus a contextually sensitive philosophy of the subject, but we live in an increasingly mediatized media world in which representation is reworked as simulation. Quantitative approaches deal in probabilities, distributions, correlations etc., which are invaluable when dealing with large populations, provided you recognize that they are models—simulations. Although it is easy and common to slither across the dichotomy, they can never tell you what any actual person or group thinks or does. Conversely, you cannot infer from knowledge of particular people or groups, however detailed, trends in a population at large. They address different questions. Whichever approach you prefer, it is best to know what its limits are [19].

Cultural studies provide the opportunity to critically analyse what has been left. Some academics have recently asserted that including the notion of identity in cosmopolitan and ecological conceptions (i.e., hybridity, eco-criticism) has doubled the outcomes in defining the field of research about identity. Is it sufficient when it confronts concerns over the remaining issues about Chinese Indonesians, or does it only promote what it condemns? If we follow the narrative that the public is a site of contestation in Cultural Studies, we should view any

discursive effort as "a violence that we do to objects, or in any case as a practise that we impose on them, and it is in this practise that the events of discourse find their regularity" [20].

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