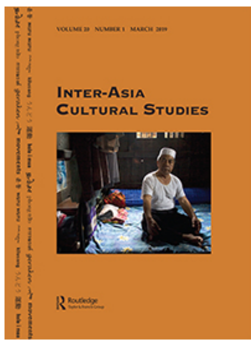

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VISUAL ESSAY

Photography and Chineseness: reflections on *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*

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ABSTRACT
This paper takes my previous photobook, *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* (2007–09) as starting point. The paper firstly details the motivations, methodology and findings of the work. It then advances some of my thoughts on photography, with its attentive focus on the particular. Photography, or documenting (as method), frames a performative and experiential space for the sitter and the photographer to project their desires in this collaborative encounter. Here, I discuss the performative in relation both to the issue of reactivity in sociological fieldwork and the cultural turn in *dakwah* amongst some Chinese Muslim leaders in the post-Suharto era. The subjectivity of each encounter helps to visualise and complicate the notion of Chineseness amongst the Chinese Muslim communities in Indonesia.

KEYWORDS
Chinese Muslims; Indonesia; identity-making; Chineseness; Sinophone; *dakwah*; photography; performative; documenting as method

Chinese Muslims in Indonesia (2007–2009)

My interest in the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia stems from a general fascination with the long-standing Chinese communities of Southeast Asia. While my known ancestors have come from Sri Lanka, Bengkalis, Quanzhou, and Zengcheng, I am still, in part, a member of the heterogeneous Chinese communities across the region.

As a photographer working at this juncture in history, it is inevitable that the main thrust of this project has been to document the stories of the Chinese Muslims today, so as to understand their motivations for conversion, and its impact on their lives and their relationships with families and friends. I have also documented the activities of organisations like PITI (Indonesian Chinese Moslem Association) and the Haji Karim Oei Foundation – both of which serve the Chinese Muslims.

Such an approach, on its own, will only present the current spate of conversions, obscuring the fact that Chinese Muslims have been present in Indonesia, perhaps even before the arrival of Admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho) in the early fifteenth century. Ma Huan ([1433] 1970, 93), a Chinese Muslim interpreter of Zheng He's fleet, reported during their passage through East Java that the local population consisted of non-Muslim natives, Muslim foreigners and Chinese – many of whom Muslims. While the controversial *The Malay Annals of Semarang and Cerbon* attributes Chinese ancestry to several of the Wali Songo (nine Muslim saints believed to have brought Islam to Java), the more reliable West Javanese tradition states that the founder of the first Javanese sultanate at Demak was a Chinese immigrant (Pigeaud and de Graaf 1976, 6–7). When Portuguese traveller Tomé Pires visited

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Java's northern coast, or the *pasisir*, in 1513, he noted that the conversion process in Java happened in two directions: foreign Muslims became Javanese and Javanese became Muslims (Ricklefs 2006, 17). The lords along the coastal areas were not Javanese of long standing, but descendants from Chinese, Parsees, Kling and other migrants (Cortesão 2005, 182).

After the Dutch had killed two-thirds of the Chinese inhabitants of Jakarta in the 1740 massacre, the pace of conversion accelerated. The Dutch took steps to limit the Chinese from adopting the Islamic faith because it would reduce the population liable to the poll tax and facilitate the fusion of the Chinese with the *pribumi*, or the indigenous (Lombard and Salmon 1977, xiv). This policy of segregation, predating those of Sukarno and Suharto, would contribute to the notion that Chineseness and Islam are incompatible. Even with the Dutch regulations in place, conversions persisted. By the start of the nineteenth century, most of the cities in Java, Madura and Makassar featured a district called Kampung Peranakan. The term *peranakan* was initially used to refer specifically to the Chinese Muslims, differing from its meaning in Malaya. These *peranakan* communities would eventually merge into the *pribumi* population.

With these concerns in mind, I have documented the mosques, *kramats* (holy places) and villages related to the history of Chinese Muslims in Indonesia. Examples include Banten's Masjid Pacinan and Jakarta's Masjid Kebon Jeruk, both of which are known to be associated with the *Peranakan* since the eighteenth century. Chinese Muslims have also built new monuments in recent years. Perhaps the most prominent is Surabaya's Masjid Cheng Hoo. Inaugurated in 2003, it is possibly the first mosque in the world to be named after a Chinese Muslim. I have also referred to Indonesia's rich legacy of oral and *babad* (chronicle) traditions for a sense of the mythical elements of the Chinese Muslim story. At Kudus, for instance, Kyai Thelingsing is credited for influencing the city's woodcarving technique, which is renowned within Indonesia. At Gresik, a Chinese Muslim by the name of Nyai Ageng Pinatih is believed to have served as the foster-mother of Sunan Giri, a member of the Wali Songo. Her tomb at Kampung Kebungson, a village she founded at Gresik, and that of Kyai Thelingsing at Kudus continue to be revered by Muslims from different ethnic groups. The presence of *kramats* in Chinese places-of-worship like the tomb of Siti Fatimah at Palembang's Hok Cheng Bio or that of Dampu Awang at Semarang's Gedung Batu suggests that religious harmony has been the norm rather than the exception in Indonesia.

The third component of my project is to track down *pribumi* Muslims who are willing to acknowledge their Chinese ancestry, thereby illustrating the long history of inter-marriages between the Chinese and the indigenous peoples. Perhaps the most famous example is the late Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, who claimed to be a descendant of Tan Kim Han, a Chinese Muslim ambassador of China at the Majapahit court. Tan's wife was supposedly the daughter of Brawijaya V and the mythical Putri Champa. On Bangka Island, I met Abang Faizal who claims to be a twelfth-generation descendant of Chinese Muslim Lim Tau Kian whose sons are credited for developing Mentok town. This Muslim family is also considered to be the first developers of Bangka's tin mines, writes political scientist Heidhues (1992, 7).

On hindsight, the fall of Suharto in 1998 has lifted the lid on identity politics in Indonesia, which has clearly impacted the Chinese Muslims. For some, it has allowed them to reiterate the possibility of being both Chinese and Islamic at the same time. For others, conversion continues to offer a way to assimilate into the mainstream society. Hopefully, my work will help to complicate the dichotomy of *pribumi* versus non-*pribumi* that continues to frame the Chinese experiences in Indonesia.

Figure 1. Chandra Nadi, Palembang, South Sumatra (February 2008).

During Chinese New Year, Chandra Nadi (or Soei Goeat Kiong) is packed with visitors. Located at 10 Ulu, this is one of the oldest Chinese temples in Palembang. Established in 1733, it was originally dedicated to Mazu, the Chinese goddess of seafarers. According to Johannes Widodo, who studies the morphology of Southeast Asian cities, there is a tomb of a Chinese Muslim navigator behind the temple's main altar. Pork is prohibited as a sign of respect to this *kramat* (holy place).

Many non-Muslim worshippers are unaware that the tomb belongs to a Chinese Muslim. On the other hand, Muslims, Chinese or otherwise, visit the tomb during Islamic holidays. According to a temple volunteer, the name of the Chinese Muslim buried there is Xu Yunqing. Once, a medium summoned his spirit and Xu introduced himself as a deity by the name of *Dabo Zilong*.

Figure 2. Sungailiat, Bangka Island (January 2008).

Bangka-born Djie Khi Sian (born in 1958; right) started a small tin-mining company in 2006. Originally a Confucius believer, he converted to Islam in 2005 when he married a Javanese woman by the name of Sulistiani (born in 1968). In 2002, she was hired from Blitar, East Java, to work as a maid for Djie's aunt. Before that, Sulistiani had already left her husband because he was unable to feed the family. Djie's aunt passed away 21 months later, leaving Sulistiani her house at Pohin Village, Sungailiat.

Due to his work, Djie seldom performs the prayers because it is not easy to find clean water at the mine for ablution. Moreover, he doesn't feel comfortable praying in the mosque amongst other Muslims. Like fellow miners, he is not averse to alcohol, especially after a day of being soaked in water at the mine. Sulistiani is more understanding, saying that it will take time for him to convert to Islam. Back home from work, Djie is seen turning on the TV while his stepson Imam (left) tries to steal some sleep in the living room. Imam is Sulistiani's son from her first marriage.

Figure 3. Sungailiat, Bangka Island (January 2008).

Formerly a Confucius believer, Marlina (born in 1980) learnt about Islam in school. Before her grandma passed away in 2007, she would always remind Marlina to continue praying to the Goddess of Mercy after her demise. But Marlina's personal quest to find the meaning of her existence eventually brought her to Islam. She converted in 1999 when she left home to study English Literature in a university at Bogor, West Java.

Naturally, Marlina did not tell her grandma about her conversion. This week, she returns to Sungailiat for the one-year death anniversary of her grandmother. She is seen joining the rituals with her paternal uncles and aunties as a sign of respect to her parents and grandmother. Many of her uncles and aunties are also Christian and Catholic converts.

Figure 4. Mentok, Bangka Island (January 2008).

Abang Faizal (born in 1976) lives in Mentok, the oldest town on the tin-producing Bangka Island. His family still owns a genealogy that traces their ancestry to Lim Tau Kian, supposedly a Ming dynasty official who married a Chinese princess, fled to Johor and converted to Islam. His descendants became the founding fathers of Mentok and are credited as the first developers of Bangka's tin mines (Heidhues 1992, 7). Faizal claims to be the twelfth-generation descendant of Lim. The veracity of Lim as a historical figure is difficult to ascertain. In the *Dictionary of Ming Biography 1368–1644* (Goodrich and Fang 1976, 927–930), a certain Lin Tao-ch'ien appears in some Chinese records as a native of Chaozhou, who started out as a clerk in the district court before becoming a pirate along the coastal regions of Guangdong and Fujian. By 1578, Lin had moved his operations to Cambodia, Siam and Pattani. The Chinese records do not seem to have information of his escape to Johor.

Till today, the male descendants of Lim at Bangka continue to use the Johor title of *Abang* while the females retain the title of *Yang*, possibly because Lim became an associate of the Johor ruler, explains political scientist Heidhues (1992, 7). According to Faizal's estimate, there are some 1,000 *Abang* and *Yang* in West Bangka alone. However, not all of them are as forthright as Faizal's immediate family in acknowledging their Chinese origin. In fact, some of them reject the idea completely and stress that they are *pure* Malays. This stands in stark contrast to the enthusiasm of Faizal's father in wanting to display the prized genealogy to me.

Figure 5. Jakarta (September 2008).

In an essay titled "The Han Family of East Java. Entrepreneurship and Politics (18th–19th Centuries)," French historian Claudine Salmon (1991, 61–74) mentions a certain Han Siong Kong (1673–1743) who was born in Tianbao, Fujian Province, and arrived in Lasem, East Java, around 1700. Of his five sons, Soero Pernollo (1720–1776) converted to Islam. That was the start of the Muslim branch of the Han family, which quickly merged with the Javanese elites. Han Siong Kong's grandson Adipati Soeroadinegoro (1752–1833) served successively as the Regent of Malang, Sidayu and Tuban (reign 1809–1818), East Java. His son Raden Panderman (born in 1778) became the Adipati of Puger (reign 1813–1818), East Java.

Once the leading fashion photographer in Indonesia, Mohamad Firman Ichsan (born in 1953, Jakarta) is the sixth-generation descendant of Raden Panderman. His father Raden Mas Ichsan served as Sukarno's national secretary. The photographer grew up as a Javanese and identifies himself as a nominal Muslim.

"The Javanese used to emphasise the fact that the island was a melting pot of some of the oldest cultures in the world. They were keen to stress that they had Chinese, Indian or Arabic blood. That was their source of pride," adds Firman.

Figure 6. Talang Temple, Cirebon, West Java (September 2008).

According to its caretaker, Talang Temple was built in 1450 as a mosque named after Tan Sam Cai. By 1635, the mosque had been converted into a Confucian temple. The controversial *Malay Annals of Semarang and Cerbon* tells a different story. Apparently, Hanafite Chinese Muslims established a mosque at Talang as early as 1415. By the end of the fifteenth century, it had become a Chinese temple. Tan Sam Cai, a renegade Muslim who served as finance minister, was a sixteenth-century personage. Nowadays, he is venerated as a deity at the temple. However, historian Claudine Salmon argues that the minister actually passed away in 1739, based on an inscription in his private cemetery.

Interestingly, entry to the Talang Temple is from the east while its sanctuary faces west, which might have been the result of orienting the space towards Mecca. Nowadays, the temple is no longer as popular as before. A group of Cirebon residents – mostly Chinese – gather at the temple on four evenings each week to practise *Pangu Shengong*. A simple *halal* dinner is served at the end of each session.

Figure 7. Cirebon, West Java (September 2007).

Mohammad Iman (1948–2010; seated), or Ong Kim Leng, married his Indonesian Chinese wife Liliyanti (right) in 1973. They did not have a religion then. As every Indonesian was required to have a religion, Ong and his wife converted to Catholicism, even though he did not feel comfortable with the idea of trinity. Meanwhile, Ong started dreaming of himself praying with other Muslims. He converted to Islam in 1993.

When she first saw him conduct the Islamic prayer, Liliyanti cried. However, when she realised that Islam did not change Ong all that much and that he had not forced her to convert, Liliyanti became more accepting. In fact, she promised to convert if he could afford a house. For years, they had lived in a rented house at Sumber, some 30 minutes' drive from Cirebon town. The couple ran a small grocery stall, earning a meagre income. That dream remained unfulfilled when he passed away in 2010.

Before he was diagnosed with kidney failure on March 2008, Ong used to visit his Muslim neighbours to preach the word of Allah. He was not paid for his religious work, dedicating it to Allah.

Figure 8. Surabaya, East Java (June 2007).

Back home, Haji Muhammad Yusuf Bambang Sujanto, or Lioe Ming Yen (born in 1947), waits for dinner to be served. Out of his children, only his elder son converted to Islam under his influence. Unfortunately, he died nine days later in a car crash in Boston. "I have experienced everything in life," laments Lioe.

Conversion, he likes to say, is for his own good. Lioe used to be a playboy. By adopting Islam (in 1980) and becoming a leader of PITI (Indonesian Chinese Moslem Association), he would be forced to be a public figure. That is the best deterrent from his womanising lifestyle. Furthermore, there is only one family with the surname of Lioe in Indonesia. By becoming a Muslim and contributing to the wider community, Lioe feels that he will have a better chance of survival. Today, his business portfolio includes banking, manufacturing and real estate. He likens himself to a fool – someone who does things that nobody wants to do. He was the first leader of the East Java branch of PITI in the 1980s and the mastermind of the Cheng Hoo Mosque (inaugurated in 2003) in Surabaya.

Figure 9. Surabaya, East Java (October 2007).

Iiv Febriana (born in 1983; in white headdress) is born to a Javanese father and a Chinese mother who converted to Islam for her marriage. Iiv is a member of Hizb ut-Tahrir, a global Islamic party working to bring Muslims back to an Islamic way-of-life under the Caliphate system. In Indonesia, Hizb ut-Tahrir is not a political party. Much of its current work involves educating Indonesians about the religion as a comprehensive system to manage the personal sphere of an individual, as well as the affairs of the state and society. Iiv is responsible for teaching young Indonesians about HIV, drugs and sexual reproduction through seminars, talk shows and games.

"Indonesians see Islam primarily as a religion. That is what we call moderate Islam in this country," explains Iiv, who is seen with fellow volunteers preparing Idul Fitr (Muslim holiday marking the end of Ramadan) gifts for local political leaders. "However, when we tell people that Islam is a complete system that governs all aspects of our lives, we are tagged as fundamentalists."

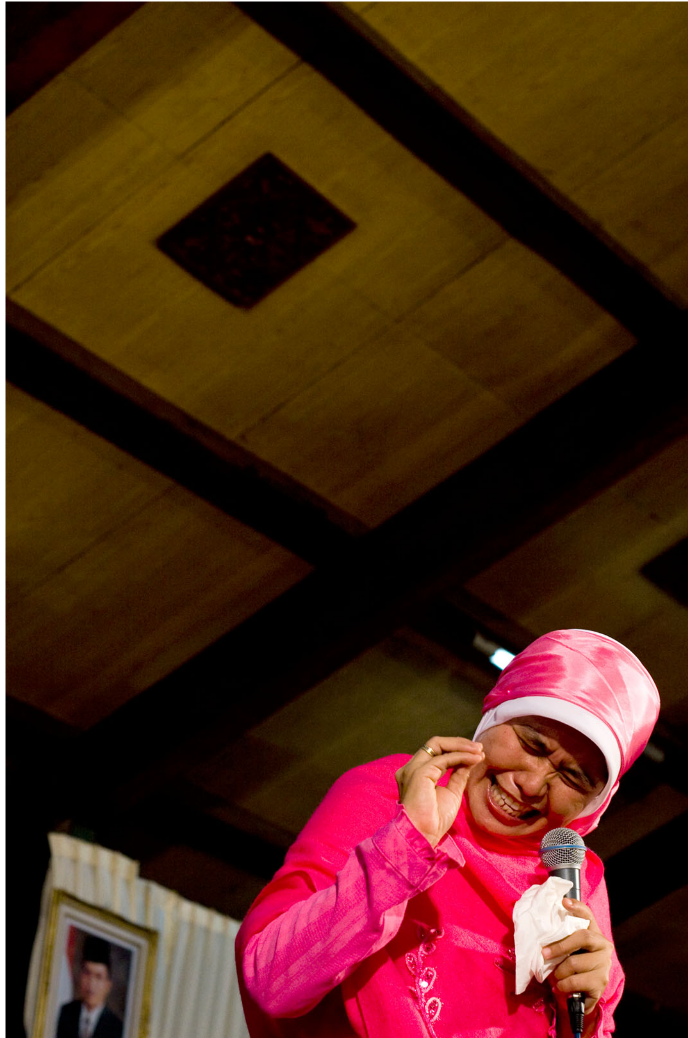

Figure 10. Malang, East Java (June 2007).

Growing up in Jakarta, Tan Mei Hwa (born in 1968) lived in a household of mixed religious faiths. In 1986, after reading about Islam on her own, Tan converted. She then studied under a *kyai* (Islamic teacher) until she was 24. Tan studied law in the university, which she did not like at all. After working as a lawyer for two years, she found the money politics too much to bear. She left the job and worked as an office manager for the next ten years.

Tan started her *dakwah* (religious proselytizing) in 1992. In 2000, she became a fulltime *nyai* (female Islamic teacher). Her *dakwah* sessions are often interspersed with jokes, as Tan has been a jester since her childhood years. And yet, her sessions are often very moving. It is common for her audience to break down during her prayers. When her *dakwah* programme started broadcasting on TV across East Java in 2006, Tan became a celebrity. Nowadays, fans mob her wherever she goes. “If someone comes for my *dakwah* and improves his or her behaviour, I will be very happy,” says Tan, who also works as a motivational speaker.

Figure 11. Pasongsongan, Madura Island (August 2009).

The history of Chinese settlers in the fishing village of Pasongsongan is imperfectly known. Ibnu Suaidi (born in 1955), native of Kampung Peranakan at Pasongsongan, tells a confused tale about his family history. Nonetheless, it is plausible that his ancestors had arrived in the nineteenth century. The Arabic inscription at his family house, dating its construction in 1847, lends weight to this possibility. At Ibnu Suaidi's family cemetery, there are Islamic tombs of more than 120 years old.

Suaidi's forefathers were merchants who traded timber and rice in Madura, Sulawesi and Taiwan. His ancestors did not become *pribumi* (indigenous) with their conversion, unlike most Indonesian Chinese who marry *pribumi* Muslims, as the tendency is for these families to gradually become "indigenous." In the case of Suaidi's family, until his father's generation, family members were not allowed to marry *pribumi* partners. That restriction ended with Suaidi, who married a Javanese lady from Solo, Central Java. There are some 120 Chinese Muslims at Pasongsongan and they have become Suaidi's relatives through intermarriages within the families.

Reflections on *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*

In my work, I pursue several trajectories concurrently. I write about photography in Southeast Asia, looking at how the medium intersects with art history, cultural politics, anthropology, media studies and ethics. As an artist, I use photography to record and aestheticise the experiences of Chineseness in Southeast Asia. I have also taught different aspects of photographic practices in tertiary institutions and through *mínjiān*-organised workshops.

In the first part of this section, I will try to offer a reflective appraisal of *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*, the aforementioned photobook that I published with Select Books in 2011. This self-funded project was made from 2007 to 2009.[1] Here, I begin by categorising the usual ways in which photographers visualise the Chinese and Muslim communities. This allows me to articulate what photography can or cannot do in ethnography and social research. I then detail the motivations, approach and findings of *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*.

In the second part, the essay advances some of my thoughts on photography, especially its attentive focus on the particular. Photography, or documenting (as method), frames a performative and experiential space for the sitter (the person who appears in the viewfinder) and the photographer to project their desires in this collaborative encounter.

I use the word *documenting* for at least two reasons: as a means to differentiate it from the institutionalised genre of *documentary photography* (and photojournalism), and as an intervention against the art ecologies in Southeast Asia that are prejudiced against what *looks like* straight (hence, conceptually naïve) photography. In both cases, the intention is to urge a renewed focus on photography (and documenting) as an active and negotiating process between the sitter and the photographer. In this essay, I attempt to bring documenting into a dialogue with both the issue of reactivity in sociological fieldwork and the cultural turn in *dakwah* amongst some Chinese Muslim leaders in the post-Suharto era. In general, *dakwah* or preaching "involves calling people to the way of truth in all aspects of life" (Chuah 2002, 14). In practice, *dakwah* takes shape in a spectrum of ways for the believers. In the later part of the essay, I will detail these forms of *dakwah* vis-à-vis the presence of a fieldworker or a photographer (like myself).

You may ask: Is there any connection between photography and Chineseness? Should scholars of humanities and social sciences be informed on how to think about photography? After all, the use of photography in sociology and anthropology has been treated by some quarters with ambivalence, even though there is also an unmistakable increase in literature over the years calling for a renewed engagement with the medium. I believe photography can help us visualise the experiences of Chineseness in Southeast Asia, which then allows us to work through the problematic construct of Chineseness. I make this proposition at the end of this essay.

Photographing the Chinese and Muslim communities: challenges and possibilities

Let us turn our attention briefly to the ways in which photographers visualise the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. In the works of some local and visiting photographers, there is an unmistakable focus on symbols like red lanterns, Chinese restaurants and temples. At times, one cannot help but wonder whether the Chinese experiences are reducible to these well-worn symbols, as though it is natural and expected for a Chinese to eat Chinese food or to decorate their shops with red lanterns. Such an approach ignores the complexity of Chinese lives, which are marked by factors such as the languages they speak, their coming-of-age experiences, education background, economic status, religious affiliations (if any), and the number of generations removed from China, amongst others.

As for photographers from China, they envision the Chinese communities in Southeast Asia in at least two different ways. Some of them see these communities as part of the Chinese diaspora. In their portrayals, they incline towards connecting their achievements and success with a fetishised notion of Chineseness. This is the logic behind statements like "The Malaysian Chinese are hard-working while the Malays are lazy" or "The Chinese are more interested in education than the *pribumi* (the indigenous)." I concur with theorist Shih Shu-Mei (2013, 28) who notes that the unifying category of the Chinese diaspora needs to be interrogated,

> not only because it is complicit with China's nationalist calling to the "overseas Chinese" who are supposed to long to return to China as their homeland and whose ultimate purpose is to serve China, but also because it unwittingly correlates with and reinforces the Western and other non-Western (such as American and Malaysian) racialized construction of Chineseness as perpetually foreign ("diasporic") and hence Chinese immigrants as not qualified to be authentic locals.

In contrast, some China photographers see the "overseas Chinese," especially those who have lost their command of Mandarin, as people who have become *pribumi*. This falls well within the dialectic of China-centric Han racism, which "existed long before China's encounter with the West and is found today in Mainland China's interactions with its Asian neighbours and within the Han population itself" (Chen 2010, 259–260). These photographers are guided by the assumption that China constitutes the "cultural/geographical core in relation to which the westernized overseas Chinese is forced to take up a humble position, even a position of shame and inadequacy over her own 'impurity'" (Ang 2001, 32).

If we look at the photographic portrayal of Islam, we often see images of mosques and rituals, as though the complexity of Islamic experiences can be reduced to these clichés. The longstanding and uncritical association of Islam with fundamentalism also inflicts the coverage of the religion. In relation to Indonesia, this problematic portrayal of Islam has re-emerged with great currency following the spate of bombings at Bali in 2002 and 2005, at the JW Marriott Hotel of Jakarta in 2003 and 2009, and the Australian Embassy in 2004. If anything, this has made Indonesians more aware of the ease in which their images can be misconstrued by the media (Rifky Effendy 2008, 67).

Thus far, I seem to have generated the impression that photography is destined only to create stereotypes. It is clearly reductive to assume that only photographers are susceptible to the reproducing of the aforementioned stereotypes. Such a perspective is somewhat connected to a general scepticism towards the visual in social research, which can be traced to the enthrallment of language in Euro-American societies where the "use of vision and appreciation of the visual is compartmentalized or constrained" (Banks 2001, 8). In other words, the "disembedding of visual culture, and its containment in a discourse of 'art' has caused a suspicion of images in other contexts, and a consequent need to constrain and limit the work that they do" (Banks 2001, 9). Hence, in anthropology, for instance, there is a systematic marginalisation of the visual in its analysis (Edwards 1997, 76). In response, Edwards (1997, 53–60) has argued provocatively for the re-inscription of the *expressive* in photography within the discipline. She posits that photography's "fragmentation, dislocation, non-narrative line" should be rendered as positives (Edwards 1997, 75), allowing the medium to "communicate about culture, people's lives, experiences and beliefs, not at the level of surface description but as a visual metaphor which bridges that space between the visible and invisible" (Edwards 1997, 58). In this way, the realist paradigm in photography is unpacked, "unmasking not only the structures and metaphors of the things themselves but those of the inscription and performances of their 'realist' representation" (Edwards 1997, 59). This reflective mode informs my current appraisal of *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*. I have come to realise that my documenting has opened up a

performative and experiential space for the sitters to project their stories and desires. I hope to flesh out this proposition as this essay unfolds.

Here, it is also worthwhile to tap into a recently published dialogue concerning the technologies of writing (the medium of literature) and photography, co-authored by acclaimed writer Ayu Utami and her partner, influential photographer Erik Prasetya. As they (Erik Prasetya and Ayu Utami 2014, 11) contend:

> Both literature and photography break down the flow of reality into storable units. In this way, units can be controlled, used, reconstructed, developed. It is true that literature does not have the same ethical problems as photography. Because language will never truly copy reality. Yet, this is precisely language's main problem. It can never truly discover reality. It remains firmly within the systems of signs, never to come into direct contact with reality. Photography steals, copies, and transcribes reality.

While acknowledging the limits of writing, Erik Prasetya and Ayu Utami (2014, 26) recognise the violence of both technologies in cutting up the world into fragments that can be used and manipulated. Nevertheless, no medium can truly aspire to reproduce an exact facsimile of the world. They (Erik Prasetya and Ayu Utami 2014, 26) add: "Each medium creates its own limitations. It requires other medium (media) to present what escapes its limit."

The interplay of words and photography in *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia* acknowledges such a perspective. I cannot deny the ethnographic impetus of my work, created in awareness that the legacy of the Chinese Muslims was deemed to be taboo during Suharto's reign (Van Dijk 2007, 52). While a fuller consideration of such an intervention remains outside the scope of this essay, I recognise that a photograph is always

> out there, an object in the world, and anyone, always (at least in principle), can pull at one of its threads and trace it in such a way as to reopen the image and renegotiate what it shows, possibly even completely overturning what was seen in it before. (Azoulay 2008, 13)

Chinese Muslims in Indonesia: methodology, findings and reflections

When I first embarked on making *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*, I made a conscious attempt to avoid the aforementioned pitfalls. My relationship with the sitters is one of a partial insider and a partial outsider. There are aspects of their lives that I cannot fathom. There are also aspects that I can empathise. For things that I did not understand, I tried to traverse the gap through reading and fieldwork. I made a deliberate attempt to reach out to researchers like Leo Suryadinata, Claudine Salmon, Myra Sidharta, Johannes Widodo and Edhi Setiawan, amongst others, to tap on their expertise.

There is in fact a substantial amount of literature concerning the *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*. However, as such materials are often published in academic journals and specialist titles, they struggle to gain broader circulation. An obvious motivation in my work is to try to convey some of these findings through photographs, which are thought to be more immediate.

There were already Chinese Muslims living in Java before the island converted gradually to Islam (Pigeaud and de Graaf 1976, 1–23). Ma Huan ([1433] 1970, 93), the Muslim interpreter who visited Java and Palembang during Zheng He's fourth expedition (1413–1415), reported that the Chinese settlers in Java were originally from Zhangzhou, Quanzhou and the Guangdong Province, with many following the Islamic faith and "doing penance and fasting."

From 2007 to 2009, I shuttled back-and-forth between Indonesia and Singapore for this project – visiting Bangka Island, Palembang in South Sumatra, different places in Java, and the Sumenep Regency on Madura Island. I visited certain places because they are highlighted in research conducted by scholars and writers. In other instances, I followed the leads of my local contacts, visiting

less obvious sites like Salatiga, Central Java, in order to spend time with Iskandar Abdurrahman (born in 1965, Lampung, Sumatra) who was then trying to build a pagoda-style pesantren (Koran learning centre) and mosque in the village.

In general, when I met potential sitters, I would first do an interview. The interview was usually informal, almost like chitchat, but fairly detailed. I found it useful in relaxing my interviewees. It helped to create a sense of intimacy because they needed to disclose certain details of their lives during the process. It also allowed them to find out more about my work. So the interview is actually a two-way exchange.

After that, I would tell them that I wanted to photograph their daily routine. This is one way in which documentary photographers work – staying with the sitters and photographing their lives. This is in line with my intention of going beyond the cliché images of Islam and Chineseness. I wanted to photograph my sitters at work and at home. I wanted to see their interaction with friends and strangers. These are important details. They provide us additional context to understand the Chinese Muslim subjectivities. I would photograph each sitter for one or two days. Very often, I would revisit them several months later to track the changes in their lives. Strictly speaking, this is slightly different from sociological fieldworkers who deploy "crude time-sampling devices" in their research. I did not discipline myself to trigger a fixed number of shots every hour. However, I made a conscious attempt to not only photograph situations that appeared to be visually interesting. If the theory (however basic it may be) that informs a photographer is "itself a sampling device, specifying what must be incorporated into a full description" of the work (Becker 2006, 231–232), I hope my approach (which I have explained thus far) has been informed by the writings of historians, anthropologists and sociologists whom I followed.

Some numbers first: There is no official data but a recent estimate suggests that 5.41 percent of the Indonesian Chinese are Muslims (Aris Ananta, Evi Nurvidya Arifin, and Bakhtiar 2008, 30). In comparison, another scholar (Hew 2011, 31) speculates that around 2–3 percent of the Indonesian Chinese are of Islamic faith. Nevertheless, with the Chinese forming less than 1.2 percent of the country's population, Chinese Muslims are a minority within the minority (Aris Ananta, Evi Nurvidya Arifin, and Bakhtiar 2008, 25).

At the onset of my work, political scientist Leo Suryadinata reminded me that if I looked for the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia today, most of them would likely be *muallaf*, or recent converts. Most of the Chinese Muslims in the past would have merged with the *pribumi* (Thé 1965, 69–76). Since it is impossible to go back in time, I would have to find creative ways to convey their histories. One way is to photograph the historical monuments related to these early communities. They include sites like the Agung Mosque in Demak, Central Java. Demak is home to the first Islamic kingdom in Java, founded possibly by a Muslim migrant of Chinese origin (Pigeaud and de Graaf 1976, 6–7). At Banten, West Java, I visited the remains of the Pacinan Mosque, which lacks Chinese architectural details. However, according to historians Lombard and Salmon (2001, 189), the mosque was built by others and slowly annexed by the Chinese Muslims in the eighteenth century. In Batavia, Tamien Dosol Seeng, kapitan of the Chinese Muslims from 1780 to 1797, helped to establish the Kebon Jeruk Mosque in 1785 or 1786 (Heuken 2007, 194; Lombard and Salmon 1977, xv). In 1740, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) massacred two-thirds of the 15,000 Chinese residents in Batavia in retaliation for a revolt. In its aftermath, many Chinese posed as Muslims to escape prosecution. The construction of the Kebon Jeruk Mosque and two other mosques in Batavia was associated with this wave of conversion (Lombard and Salmon 1977, xiv–xv). Over time, the connection between these monuments and the Chinese Muslim experiences has become obscured or forgotten.

Meanwhile, there are other *kramats* (holy places) that continue to retain their Chineseness. The Hokkien-sounding name of Thelingsing is a case in point. The tomb of this Islamic teacher, who is credited for bringing a special woodcarving technique to Kudus, Central Java, continues to be venerated by Muslims. Candra Nadi in Palembang is another example. During Chinese New Year, the temple is usually packed with non-Muslim pilgrims. Apparently, there is a holy tomb of a Chinese Muslim navigator behind the temple's main altar. The presence of Muslim tombs in Chinese temples is by no means unique to Candra Nadi. Perhaps the most famous example is the heavily renovated Sam Poo Kong, or Gedung Batu, in Semarang, Central Java.

During my work, I also made a deliberate attempt to track down *pribumi* Indonesians who are open about their Chinese ancestry, imagined or otherwise. This is far from easy, given the fact that Indonesian Chinese have sometimes been consigned the role of the scapegoat, buffering the elite and the masses during episodes of distress (Purdey 2006, 25).

The situation at Pasongsongan, Sumenep Regency, Madura Island, merits special attention. There, we find a longstanding *peranakan* community that has retained both its Islamic and Chinese identities for generations, instead of becoming *pribumi*. To this end, the meaning of the word *peranakan*, as it is used today at Pasongsongan, is closer to its older meaning, which referred specifically to the Chinese Muslims. Only in the twentieth century did the colonial authorities change its usage to mean Chinese who were "Indies-born, reflecting the distinction between immigrants, who were aliens, and local-born, who were Dutch subjects" (Heidhues 1998, 153).

In relatively isolated areas like Pasongsongan, Ambunten and Legung across Sumenep, the Chinese Muslims have lived closely amongst the Madurese (Steenbrink 1984, 88). Those who are richer have retained their Islamic and Chinese identities through "endogamy, in which they married other *Peranakan* or sometimes, non-*Peranakan* Chinese to keep their distinct identity and business lineage." Those who are not in business have intermarried with Madurese and gradually lost their *peranakan* heritage (Hew 2011, 235). When historian Ong Hok Ham (2005, 25) visited in 1950, he reported some 150 *peranakan* families at Pasongsongan. There are now 120 *peranakans* left, says Ibnu Suaidi (born in 1955), my main informant there. There is no non-Muslim Chinese at Pasongsongan.

It is possible that the *peranakan* community at Pasongsongan gradually took shape during the first half of the nineteenth century (Steenbrink 1984, 87). Ibnu's family still owns a house built by his ancestor, which features an Arabic inscription dating it to 1847. The community also maintains a cemetery exclusive to the *peranakans*. If we believe Ibnu's claim that his great-grandfather is buried there, the cemetery should have been in use, at least since the start of the twentieth century. My estimation is partially based on the knowledge that Ibnu Sauidi's father, K. Siradjudin, was born in 1929.

Of course, most of the people whom I met for this project are first or second-generation converts. They also have poignant stories to tell.

At Tuban, East Java, I befriended Agung Julkifli Mohamad (born in 1969, Surabaya; see issue page picture) who converted to Islam when he married his Javanese wife in 1994. His father, originally from Taiwan, was very angry and reprimanded him for marrying a Muslim. In 1998, Agung founded an Islamic kindergarten in the suburbs. Sometime in 2002, local residents conspired to destroy the kindergarten for reasons unknown. Perhaps they were jealous of his success as an outsider running a kindergarten in their neighbourhood. Maybe they were not convinced that a Chinese could provide proper Islamic education. Naming the school after his elder daughter probably made things worse because her name sounded "Christian."

Thankfully, the local government intervened and damage was prevented. The incident clearly scarred Agung's life, even though enrolment has since remained high. Agung even contemplated converting back to Christianity. He would ask his wife to cook pork and eat with him.

Sometimes, he would hit her with a wooden cross. But she resisted, eventually winning him over. During Idul Adha in 2008, I followed Agung when he visited his mother-in-law. As we stepped into the house, he dropped to his knees and asked for repentance. Of course, it is common for Muslims to ask for forgiveness from family members and friends during religious occasions. In Agung's case, his gesture towards his mother-in-law, performed in front of my camera, marks his lingering fear. Agung's conversion to Islam does not seem to guarantee his security or inclusion within his own country, or even amongst fellow Muslims.

With these photographs, I produced the photobook, *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*. To circulate my work to a broader audience, I have displayed it in public exhibitions hosted by Galeri CCCL Surabaya (2008), National Gallery of Indonesia (2010) and the Ciputra World Surabaya Mall (2015). Local media have also reported on my work. A selection of photographs, accompanied by detailed captions, is available as a free download from my blog. Interestingly, some photographers feel that this project is "nothing much," preferring my earlier work, which is certainly more visual. This is the burden of photography (and literature), which continues to be plagued by its audience's demand for drama (Erik Prasetya and Ayu Utami 2014, 30).

In this work, I have tried to move away from making "graphic" images, allowing the research to guide my documenting. I hope I have been somewhat successful in producing a body of work that looks beyond the stereotypical images of Chineseness and Islam. We have to remember that, while Islam is important to the Chinese Muslims in Indonesia, it is "not a totalising factor that determines their daily behaviour" (Hew 2011, 227). The identity expression of the Chinese Muslims is often situational and contingent (Hew 2011, 51), "in which a Muslim who has Chinese descent can say no to 'Chineseness,' while a non-Chinese Muslim can embrace Chinese culture if he or she wants to" (Hew 2011, 34). In my work, I focus on the subjectivities of their varied experiences in Indonesia. Writing about my work, historian Charles Coppel (2011, 2) notes that the photographs urge viewers to "think about particular places and individual people."

If used in a deliberate way, photography is well suited to pick out the particular, as a straight photograph is in effect a de-contextualised, split-second capture of what occurred in front of the camera lens, subjected to the decision-making process of the photographer at the point of triggering the shutter. A visually striking image can easily become iconic, perhaps because "connotation drawn from knowledge is always a reassuring force – man likes signs and likes them clear" (Barthes 1977, 29). But a body of work, consisting of many photographs (and interjected by lengthy captions and text), helps to present a more complex scenario. To acknowledge this is to first debunk the myth that a photograph is worth a thousand words. If we do not expect a paragraph or a poem to represent the reality, why do we burden the photograph in this way? This uncritical coupling between a photograph and some ambiguous notion of truth has been cultivated, in part, by some photographers to valorise their work.

Documenting as method

It is true that photography cannot be completely divorced from its representational reality (Erik Prasetya and Ayu Utami 2014, 31). Nevertheless, to go beyond the realist paradigm and the evidential value of photography, I argue that it is also productive for us to rethink photography, or documenting (as method), through the metaphors of *embedded-ness* and *embodiment*.

The practice of photography is embedded in the milieu that the practitioner and the sitter find themselves in, shaped by ideas and visuals that circulate locally and globally, and marked by personal desires and creative decisions. Here, I am informed by a more intense scrutiny, since the

1980s, on the authority and authorship of colonial and anthropological images, prompting us to reconsider them as collaborative events inflicted by the taste and expectations of the sitters (Pinney 2011, 116). The embedded metaphor is partially informed by anthropologist Karen Strassler's (2010, 23) deployment of the word *refraction* to refer to the process in which "everyday encounters with [vernacular] photographs entangle widely shared visions with affectively charged personal narratives and memories" in Java. Building on Strassler's work, I wish to highlight the fact that different kinds of practitioners, like the journalists or the street photographers, typically operate from varying understandings of the medium. Even amongst documentary photographers, for instance, there are significant differences in how they understand the potential and limits of the medium. I use the idea of embedded-ness partly as recognition of the varying discourses that exist within an imagined community of practitioners. At the same time, the word suggests a rootedness or connection to a place or space. Despite the digitisation of photography and the hype of global art, local concerns and localised understandings of art and photography continue to influence photographic practices across Southeast Asia. Like the idea of refraction, the notion of embedded-ness does not delimit the personal desires of the practitioners. This helps us segue to the idea of embodiment.

In her study on studio portraiture in Java, for instance, Strassler (2010, 88) notes the preference of Indonesian customers in the 1950s for colour backdrops, even though it was only possible to produce black-and-white photographs then. Clearly, the *experience* of going to the studios to be photographed was as important as the outcome of receiving the photograph. The embodied metaphor can be further interrogated through the affective turn, or the return to *feeling*, in recent scholarship on photography (Brown and Phu 2014, 1–25). Elsewhere, I have tried to unpack the experience of documenting through the Mandarin idiom of *shen-ti li-xing* (Zhuang 2015, 58). Using the documenting practice of Singaporean photographer Loke Hong Seng (born in 1943, Singapore) as example, I argue that in his repeated and self-initiated visits to the places where he photographed, he developed a kind of *gu-nian* (or "concern") for the people there. Otherwise, there was little to motivate Loke, who worked professionally as a radio broadcaster then, to make photographs that he could hardly sell to publications or submit for photo club competitions. We should also recognise that photography does not "merely duplicate the everyday world, but is, rather, prized for its capacity to […] construct the world in a more perfect form than is possible to achieve in the hectic flow of the everyday" (Pinney 1997, 149). This is documenting of a "world making" modality.

Extending the metaphor of embodiment, I believe that documenting (as method), in effect, opens up an experiential and performative space for both the photographer and the sitter. This complicates the idea that photography is a traumatic intrusion by the all-knowing photographer on the helpless sitter. My point is not to say that we no longer need to interrogate the power relationship between the photographer and the photographed. Perhaps more than before, we need to interrogate each situation on a case-by-case basis, without assuming the context of trauma as our starting position.

Here, we can think of the performative and the experiential in relation to the issue of reactivity in sociological research, in which the presence of the fieldworker may or may not affect the people being observed (Becker 2006, 233–234). In other words, does my presence as a photographer alter the behaviour of the sitter? Of course, reactivity is, in some cases, contingent upon the "freedom of those observed to respond to the observer's (or photographer's) presence" (Becker 2006, 234). In my documenting work, I recognise the issue of reactivity. I feel that in any sustained engagement with a sitter, reactivity exists, almost by default, in that photographic event. In fact, I wish to acknowledge, privilege, and record the authenticity of this encounter. The metaphor of the *invisible*

photographer is frequently misunderstood. In practice, this is made possible by how some photographers work, with speed, with experience, or with force. In the making of *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*, I sought consent from all the sitters to participate in my work. In a limited way, I think of them as my collaborators.

We can also think of the performative and the experiential in relation to the cultural *dakwah* of the Chinese Muslims who participated in my photographs. In his study on Chinese Muslim identities in post-Suharto Indonesia, political scientist Hew Wai Weng (2011, 20) observes the shift, amongst Chinese Muslim leaders, "from the dominant discourse of 'assimilation of Chinese Indonesians through Islam' (*asimilasi lewat Islam*) during the New Order period to 'preaching Islam through Chinese cultural approaches' (*dakwah pendekatan budaya*) in the past decade." As a fieldworker in Indonesia, Hew (2011, 51) experienced three forms of *dakwah* – "direct invitation," "indirect persuasion," and "non-verbal preaching." Many Chinese Muslims preferred indirect persuasion – "promoting positive images of Islam, sharing their benefits of being a Muslim, and comparing Islam with their previous religions." Their generosity and assistance towards Hew constituted the non-verbal expression of *dakwah*. Some of them also highlighted their Chinese identity as a form of *dakwah* to show that Islam and Chineseness are not incompatible. Being interviewed, having their stories heard, is also for some a form of *dakwah* (Hew 2011, 50). This echoes my experiences in Indonesia. As first-generation convert Ivan Sasongko (born in 1961) explained, it is his duty and mission to see people like me to speak about Islam.

The most tangible outcome of this cultural turn in *dakwah* is the recent proliferation of pagoda-style mosques across Java and Palembang. The most widely known example is the inauguration of Masjid Cheng Hoo in Surabaya in 2003. This phenomenon is what Hew (2011, 242) calls "hybrid performance," the "intentional combination of Chinese and Islamic elements" in the identity expression of some Chinese Muslims in Indonesia. This hybrid performance "does not symbolise an existing ethno-religious reality, but rather brings a new reality into being, by reappropriating Chinese traditions and Islamic messages to promote a sense of shared experience that can unify Chinese Muslims." We may consider some of the sitters who appear in my work as collaborators performing this new reality into being. I am not the only audience of this *dakwah*. Shared on the virtual sphere, printed in my photobook, or displayed in exhibitions, these modes of circulating the photographs amplify the reach of their *dakwah*. However, the most important audience here is Allah. When I photographed Ivan Sasongko performing the *sholat* (five daily Islamic prayers) at home, he said to me: "Honestly, I still do not know whether my *sholat* is good or not. I'm not doing *sholat* because you are here. I am doing it for Allah. Only Allah knows."

While some Chinese Muslims in Indonesia are happy to perform the compatibility of Islam and Chineseness for my camera, there are others who articulate their identities quite differently. There are some who no longer wish to perform their Chineseness once they converted to Islam. Nevertheless, if we accept Hew's (2011, 251) claim that the emergence of Chinese Muslim cultural identities has provided more complex cultural representations to both Chinese and Islamic identities in Indonesia, then I believe that photography is perfectly poised to highlight the particularity of these identity articulations. It allows us to record these encounters, to contemplate and ask questions.

Photographing/unpacking Chineseness

At this point, let us turn to someone like Kiagus Mohammad Idris (born in 1933; see cover picture). He claimed to be the ninth-generation descendant of three Chinese captains who fled to Palembang

at the fall of the Ming dynasty. At least two of the captains are believed to be Muslims, a claim which is difficult to verify. Today, most people will take him to be Palembangese Malay. Even though he does not go around emphasising or denying his Chineseness, when I present his portrait as part of *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*, am I perpetuating a kind of violence that denies his agency in losing Chineseness and becoming local?

Should I consider Idris a Chinese Muslim or a Palembangese Malay? Or is he both? As a theoretical intervention coined by Shih (2013, 37), Sinophone studies reminds us that the diasporic condition has to have an end date. In vernacular usage though, substituting *Chinese* for *Sinophone* seems to signal a kind of retreat from the messy politics of articulating one's identity into being. When someone is called *Orang Cina* or *Orang Tionghoa* in Indonesia, there is a reality that cannot be erased into the abstract. For some Indonesian Chinese, *Orang Cina*, literally *Chinaman*, is a term of prejudice. In response, they use *Orang Tionghoa* as a substitute. This is the everyday reality in which identity politics is contested in Indonesia.

As Shih (2007, 16) reminds us, identity is "the way in which we perceive ourselves, and others perceive us, and is constituted by a dialectics of seeing and being seen." In other words, it occurs "in and through representation." Here, we may return to the idea of documenting as a means to complicate the dichotomy of *pribumi* versus non-*pribumi* (which is usually taken to mean the Indonesian Chinese). In practice, a person's appearance still plays a crucial role in maintaining this simplistic binary, a legacy of Suharto's New Order (Hoon 2008, 177). Very often, it is the *pribumi* who remind the *Orang Tionghoa* that they look Chinese, even though the latter may no longer identify themselves as such (Natalia Soebagjo 2008, 142). It is clearly on the level of appearance that we should begin to decouple Chineseness with a certain look. I use photography to stage this intervention. It allows me to come into collaborative encounters with people like Idris and Abang Faizal, incorporating their portraits as part of the Chinese Muslim subjectivities. But we have to do more than that. We have to encourage the audience to question whether the simple dichotomy of *pribumi* versus Chineseness can adequately represent the full range of ethnic subjectivities in Indonesia. Similarly, when I include someone like Ivan Sasongko in *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*, it re-inscribes his place in Indonesia because typically, a Chinese face is seldom seen as representative of the local (Strassler 2010, 66).

This is the political imperative of my work, a kind of intervention on the dichotomous construct of *pribumi* versus non-*pribumi*. To recap, documenting (as method), in its attentive focus on the particular, opens up a performative and experiential space for both the photographer and the sitters to project their desires. In the case of *Chinese Muslims in Indonesia*, I hope it has registered the myriad of photographic encounters between me and the sitters, allowing the latter to perform *dakwah* and/or their identity articulations for my camera. I hope that my documenting has also contributed, in a modest way, to the unpacking of the construct and appearances of Chineseness.

Special terms

Quanzhou	泉州	Shen-ti li-xing	身体力行
Zengcheng	增城	Gu-nian	顾念
Mínjiān	民间	Masjid Cheng Hoo	郑和清真寺
Candra Nadi	水月宫	Pangu Shengong	盘古神功
Mazu	妈祖	Lioe Ming Yen	柳民源
Lin Tao-ch'ien	林道乾	Tan Mei Hwa	陈美花
Chaozhou	潮州		

Note

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