NEGOTIATING THE CONFUCIAN RELIGION IN INDONESIA: INVENTION, RESILIENCE AND REVIVAL (1900–2010) [1]


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This dissertation investigates the process of inventing and negotiating the idiosyncratic Confucian religion in Indonesia. Widely known as a philosophy or ethics, even in China, its original place, I trace the trajectory that framed Confucianism as a religion from the period of Dutch colonialism (1900–1945) to post-colonial Indonesia (1945–2010). Combining historical methods and ethnography, I demonstrate the transformation, change, continuity and revival of religious ideas and practices, as well as the struggles of its believers to promote and institutionalize them in the contemporary time. The invention of the Confucian religion, I argue, was a result of the transmission of ideas and knowledge about Chinese culture and religion, which travelled globally from China to Europe and, eventually, from Europe to the Dutch East Indies, later known as Indonesia. The unavoidable influence of Christianity and modernity took place during a period when European knowledge came to the Dutch colony through the medium of printing materials. Ideas also traveled within the intra-Asian network, particularly from Singapore and China, where Confucian revival movements were inaugurated in the end of the nineteenth century. Both routes, however, were also influenced by Western ideas of religion. My analysis of Confucianism's invention sheds light on the multiple layers of translation politics and the contestation of different interpretations about Confucianism, which involved different actors, whose power and sources of knowledge varied. During different regimes of the Indonesian post-colonial period (1945–2010), I investigate the problematic position of the Confucian religion under the rise of Indonesian nationalism, hostility against China and communism, and practices of religious governance and cultural citizenship. Under strong pressures from Islamic majority groups, the Indonesian government began to apply “Belief in One and Omnipotent God.” Confucian adherents were not exempt from this principle, and thus the Confucian religion took its unique form, in part, to accommodate the Indonesian state's criteria of religion. Despite efforts to comply with the state's criteria of a religion, the Indonesian government under Suharto's authoritarian regime (1966–1998) eventually degraded Confucianism to a sect in 1977. My analysis of the Indonesian state's practices of governing religion demonstrates an alternative to secularism and the ways the state benefits from religious citizenship. I analyze the Confucian believers' complex survival strategies to cope with the Soeharto's oppression. These strategies combined non-confrontational yet persistent bargains for their civil rights, the adoption of Indonesian principles and values, agentive maintenance of their connection with Chinese culture, legal actions against the Indonesian government, and raising of international awareness and support. The combination of passive and active agencies ensured resilience of their religiosity during and revival after Suharto's regime, which ended in 1998. In the post-reformation regimes (1998–2010), Confucian believers revived their religion under the Indonesian government's restorative policies and facilitation. I examine their efforts to reinvigorate the shrinking Confucian community, to re-connect themselves with China and to become involved in the global Confucian movement.

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Status of Research or Work: Completed/published


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