

## Book Reviews

***China's Cultural Diplomacy in Indonesia: The Case of a Transnational Singing Contest.* By Chang-Yau Hoon and Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2024. ISBN: 9789815203257**

Diplomatic relations between countries can be conducted in various ways, one of which is through the field of culture. This book attempts to illustrate how Xi Jinping strives to create a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" so that China's soft power approach can align and facilitate cultural exchanges with partner countries and connections between societies, especially with Indonesian society as part of bilateral relationship management. Xi Jinping proposed this grand strategy under the name "telling China's story well."

As an effort to establish bilateral relations, this book explains that the form of investment flow from China to Indonesia has resulted in an increase in the number of people learning Mandarin and a heightened public response to Chinese cultural identity. Through the Chinese community in Indonesia, China seeks to build an imaginary transnational community through various activities such as the Chinese singing competition "Indonesia Spring Festival" and "Spring Festival Melody," which is a music festival in China. As a warmly welcomed instrument of soft power, these various programs have only succeeded in reaching the Chinese community, which is a transnational community in Indonesia.

This book shows how China utilizes soft power strategies through cultural initiatives such as the BRI and GCI to build cross-country connections, including with Indonesia, in order

to strengthen its global image and counter Western narratives. These efforts are carried out through coordinated cultural diplomacy, including academic exchanges, global media broadcasting, singing competitions, and cultural activities that highlight China's identity and heritage. However, despite these programs being well-received, the book critiques their impact, which remains limited to the Chinese community and has not yet fully reached Indonesian society inclusively.

This book attempts to depict the dynamics of Indonesia-China relations as a long journey filled with tension, transformation, and reconciliation, reflecting changes in the domestic and international political context that influence the direction of Indonesia's foreign policy. During the New Order era under President Suharto, diplomatic relations with China were severed due to strong anti-communist and anti-Chinese sentiments rooted in the aftermath of the G30S event, making China a symbol of ideological threat. However, since the Reformation of 1998, especially during the leadership of President Abdurrahman Wahid until Joko Widodo, bilateral relations began to be restored and experienced significant improvement. This book emphasizes that this change in attitude is not only marked by the restoration of Chinese ethnic rights but also through strategic transformations that make China a key partner in national infrastructure and economic development (e.g., Jakarta-Bandung high-speed train, new capital in Kalimantan).

This book attempts to explain that although the Indonesia-China relationship has significantly improved, especially in the economic field during President Jokowi's administration, it remains colored by deep-



seated tensions and distrust among the Indonesian elite (e.g., concerns over economic dependence, the influx of foreign labor, and security issues in the South China Sea). This distrust is reinforced by the persistent anti-China narrative (e.g., sentiments of nationalism, Islamism, and social inequality). These sentiments are used by conservative groups to bolster anti-China rhetoric. This book emphasizes that the success of China's public diplomacy in Indonesia heavily depends on its ability to understand and respond to the complex history of bilateral relations and the continuously evolving socio-political dynamics of Indonesia.

Next, there is a chapter that discusses China's soft power in Indonesia post-Suharto: the case of the transnational spring festival celebration. Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, the treatment of the Chinese Ethnic group in Indonesia has undergone drastic changes, starting with the restoration of the status of Chinese organizations in Indonesia. On the other hand, China has also experienced a revival in the economic field, striving to establish good relations with other countries, one of which is Indonesia, which shares the same geographical location in Southeast Asia.

This book discusses China's cultural diplomacy strategy through the organization of the Chunwan (Spring Festival Gala) and the "Spring Melody Cup" singing contest in Indonesia. The Lunar New Year is positioned as a political instrument by the Chinese Communist Party to strengthen national solidarity and disseminate the Chinese national narrative, including to the diaspora community. The Chunwan event, broadcast by CCTV since 1983, is interpreted as a form of soft power that showcases narratives of nationalism, family unity, and glorification

of the "Motherland." However, the dominant Han-centric approach and the tendency to appropriate other cultures have become major concerns. This is also evident in the Guangxi Gala, which is now spreading to Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia.

In the conclusion chapter, it is revealed that diplomacy between China and Indonesia in the cultural field is often neglected because it focuses on the economic aspect. In addition, Chang-Yau Hoon and Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia also attempt to correct the view that portrays the partner country (in this case, Indonesia) as a passive and powerless party in establishing relations with China, merely "following" what China has planned, such as gala events, singing contests, and other forms of diplomacy. On the contrary, Chang-Yau Hoon and Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia argue that Indonesia also has interests, strategies, and an active role in shaping the direction of the bilateral cultural relationship. This book sharply reveals the complex dimensions of China's cultural diplomacy, particularly in the context of organizing the Transnational Spring Festival Gala and singing contests as instruments of soft power.

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