



The Sinophone Roots of Javanese Nini Towong

This article proposes that Nini Towong, a Javanese game involving a possessed doll, is an involution of fifth-century Chinese spirit-basket divination. The investigation is less concerned with originist theories than it is a discussion of the Chinese in Indonesia. The Chinese have been in Southeast Asia from at least as early as the Ming era, yet Chinese contributions to Indonesian culture is an understudied area. The problem begins with the asymmetrical privileging of Indic over Sinic influences in early European scholarship, a situation which in turn reveals the prejudices that the Europeans brought to bear in their dealings with the Chinese of Southeast Asia in the seventeenth to nineteenth century. Europeans introduced the Chinese-Jew analogy to the region. Their disdain contributed to indigenous hostility toward the Chinese. Racism is a sensitive topic but a reminder of past injustices provides a timely warning in this moment of tense world geopolitics.

KEYWORDS: Nini Towong—*jelangkung*—spirit-basket divination—Sinophone—Sinophobia

NINI TOWONG is a Javanese rain ritual that involves a female effigy made with a coconut-shell ladle head mounted upon a basket body.* The soul of a dead person possesses the doll when it self-animates to answer questions put to it by rapping, nodding, and pointing. There is a second Indonesian spirit-basket game, *jelangkung*, from the Chinese *cai lan gong* (菜篮公), meaning “vegetable basket deity.” Two people hold onto a basket which moves to write using a pen stuck into its reeds. *Jelangkung* is the more popular of the two divinatory games. It is played all over Indonesia at temple séances and for amusement. *Jelangkung* has even featured in Indonesian horror movies.¹

Jelangkung baskets are not anthropomorphized like Nini Towong but it is necessary to drape a shirt over the basket as a condition for spirit possession. However, in the Dr. Adhyatma Health Museum on Jalan Indrapura in Surabaya, there is a unique *jelangkung* made in the image of a Chinese man, with slanted eyes and moustache. The male Chinese *jelangkung* is set next to a Nini Towong effigy which is clearly female (FIGURES 1a and 1b). The word “Nini” means “grandmother,” but it is also an affectionate term for addressing girls (ROBSON and WIBISONO 2002, 512). This explains the feminized Nini Towong, but why was the Surabaya *jelangkung* made male? We can only guess at an answer; for although there are studies on Nini Towong, research on *jelangkung* is in its nascent stages.²

This article proposes that Javanese Nini Towong is a cultural involution of Chinese spirit-basket divination. GEERTZ (1963, 81–82) describes involution as “a sort of technical hairsplitting.” Cultural artefacts are often embellished upon over time: a mask is made more ornate; a dance develops an increasingly complicated choreography. The changes may be elaborate but the original idea remains intact. This investigation into the Sinophone roots of Nini Towong adds to the knowledge of Chinese contributions to Indonesian culture, and highlights in the process the silence of early European scholarship on the subject. Indeed, the asymmetrical privileging of Indic influences to the almost total exclusion of the Chinese voice recalls early European Sinophobia. The Europeans of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries compared the Chinese disparagingly with the Jews, and this analogy contributed to indigene resentment of Chinese communities. In the present time when anti-Semitic conspiracy theories have revived in the Muslim world, and the situation in the South China Sea grows increasingly tense, a reminder of the unfortunate persistence of racialism might not go amiss.



FIGURES 1a and 1b. The Nini Towong and *jelangkung* effigies displayed at the Dr. Adhyatma Health Museum. Photos used with the kind permission of Frenavit Kusman Setia Putra. See frenavit.com (accessed November 1).

NINI TOWONG, THE DOLL THAT DANCES

Nini Towong is a basket effigy moved by a female spirit. RASSERS (1982, 36) and WESSING (1999, 664 note 38) propose that it is the female Javanese ancestral spirit, while KARTOMI (1973, 180) suggests Dewi Sri, the rice goddess, as the possessing deity. Many dictionaries define Nini Towong with specific reference to a coconut-shell head (STEVENS and SCHMIDGALL-TELLINGS 2004, 665; ATMOSUMARTO 2004, 371). Another suggestion is that *towong* alludes to the pallor of the coconut-shell face that is usually colored white with chalk with features drawn in lampblack (SITOWATI and MIKSIC 2006, 135). The celebrated Javanese dancer, Didik Nini Thowok, said that *towong* derives from *wong*, the Javanese word meaning “person,” so that Nini Towong means a doll which can move like a human.³

Nini Towong is performed as a rainmaking ritual (HAZEU 1901, 55, in WESSING 1999, 662, note 35; KARTOMI 1973, 180), or it is a divinatory game where the doll is asked to predict the coming harvest, to name a future mate, or to point to where medicinal herbs or lost objects might be found (SCHELTEMA 1912, 73–74; SUDIARNO 2002). Children, imitating adults, made Nini Towong child’s play (HUGRONJE 1906, 206; RASSERS 1982, 29–44; JORDAAN 1984, 102; PURWANINGSIH 2006). Since the 1980s, Nini Towong has been commodified as a cultural performance featuring a beautifully dressed doll, a chorus of singers, and gamelan musicians. I went in search of the touristy Nini Towong, the latest incarnation in the process of cultural involution. I collected primary evidence for this study on field trips to Semarang in July–August 2008; Singkawang, West Kalimantan, February 2008 and June–July 2009; Yogyakarta in June 2009; Jakarta in July and October 2009; and Kebumen and Cirebon in July 2010.

CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION OF NINI TOWONG

SCHECHNER (1990, 26) describes the process that can turn a village performance into a cultural treasure. It begins when curators decide that a folkloric practice constitutes an intangible heritage culture that must be conserved. The village performance, inherently improvisational, then becomes “museumified.” A “normative expectation” is authorized with “proper” choreography and music. Fancy props and attractive costumes are added to make a suitably polished showpiece that becomes a standard against which all future performances are evaluated. Nini Towong has evolved along this line.

First came the impetus for conservation: SUJARNO (2002) names Nini Towong as an ancestral game. PURWANINGSIH (2006, 45–46) proposes that the ancestral game should be taught to children at home. Then, Gadjah Mada University collaborated with the Dinas Pariwisata, Yogyakarta [the Yogyakarta Tourist Office] to stage Nini Towong as a traditional farmer’s folk performance (*Harian Jogja*, 4 May 2009). Now Nini Towong is a standard in the Yogyakarta cultural tourism repertoire.

In the evolution of Nini Towong from village ritual into cultural artefact, the performance by the Sabdo Budoyo troupe of Bantul sets out the “normative expectation.” When I asked around in Yogyakarta about Nini Towong, only one name, Sabdo Budoyo, was ever mentioned, signalling the preeminence of this group. Three important leads were a recommendation by the dancer Didik Nini Thowok;⁴ an Internet video clip of a Nini Towong performance posted by the Tembi House of Culture (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdLPHcw2Ud4> [accessed 13 April 2017]); and an article in the *Jakarta Post* (SUDIARNO 2002). All these sources referred to the Sabdo Budoyo troupe. Thus on the night of 27 June 2009, I went to the village of Grudo Panjanglejo in Pundong, Bantul, where I met sixty-eight-year-old Pak Suwardi, leader of Sabdo Budoyo. Pak Suwardi presented me with a long list of Sabdo Budoyo performances starting from 1983. This testified to regular appearances at official celebrations and at educational institutions. In 2002, the troupe performed at Jakarta’s TMII (Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, Beautiful Indonesia Miniature Park), which constitutes a cultural imprimatur as TMII is a showcase for indigenous Indonesian culture.

Pak Suwardi also presented me with notes stating that the troupe’s Nini Towong performance was created in 1938 by Pak Suwardi’s ancestors—Udisedo, Marto Jumar, and Paerah. Nini Towong was often performed in the village until 1942, when the Japanese occupation put a stop to the shows. Sabdo Budoyo resumed their Nini Towong performances in 1960 only to falter again in the economic and political turmoil of that time. In the 1980s, the Yogyakarta cultural authorities began to curate a traditional culture inventory, following through with government sponsorship and institutional patronage. Sabdo Budoyo, rising to the occasion, created a show featuring a beautiful Nini Towong doll and village performers self-consciously uniformed in Javanese costumes.

The involution of Nini Towong from village performance to cultural artefact included the modification of the doll. When once, Pak Suwardi told me, this doll was fashioned out of a basket fish trap, the doll that the troupe now employs is a



FIGURE 2. The Nini Towong doll of Sabdo Budoyo being dressed. Photograph by author.

more durable and handy prop that was made in 1980. A spare was made in 1983. The new design features foam and straw firmly wrapped around four bamboo rods. A padded bra has been added to give Nini Towong an alluring feminine silhouette. The cultural commodification of Nini Towong in the Sabdo Budoyo performance is a process of involution, for despite the costumed performers and decoratively embellished doll, the performance retains the essential mysticism of a spirit-possession ritual.

NINI TOWONG AS PERFORMED BY SABDO BUDOYO

Famous dancer Didik Nini Thowok accompanied me on my date with Nini Towong in the village of Grudo Panjangrejo. We arrived before 5 p.m. so that I

could see Nini Towong being dressed. The doll stood upon the floor of the veranda of Pak Suwardi's home, a one-storey village house. It measured about 1.5 meters tall upon its bamboo stilts. The face, made out of half a coconut shell, was painted with the features of a woman. There was no basket in the structure. The doll had long straw arms complete with five straw fingers for each hand (FIGURE 2). A woman expertly dressed the doll in Javanese costume; a green *kebaya* (blouse) over a batik sarong, with a yellow-colored sash about the waist, and a long red shawl upon its shoulders. The head was decorated with flowers and leaves (FIGURE 2).

By 6 p.m., many other villagers had gathered at Pak Suwardi's house, including Pak Paeran, a stern-looking man, aged seventy-three. He was the *pawang* (magician) and his costume, a green high-collared tunic worn over a sarong completed by a traditional Yogyakarta turban, marked him as out of the ordinary.

I was invited to dine with the village elders. We sat on the floor in a circle and ate boiled groundnuts, boiled taro, boiled banana, fried tempeh (fermented soya bean wafers), catfish curry and a stew made with beef skin crackers. We also drank lots of hot, very sweet tea. Around 6:45 p.m., after it became dark, Pak Paeran stood up and we followed him out of the house.

In the courtyard we joined a group of eleven women who were flanked by boys carrying lit bamboo torches. The women were uniformed in burgundy-colored *kebayas* over sarongs. One bore the Nini Towong doll, resting upon her shoulder, and another carried a tray of offerings—two large combs of bananas, betel leaves, tobacco, and a few sticks of incense. Pak Paeran led the way as we walked, perhaps a kilometer through the village, to a cemetery. Along the way, the women sang *sotto voce* the song *Padha mbuwang bocah bajang, rambute arang abang* (see below). When we reached the cemetery, we had to remove our shoes before crossing the threshold, even though this meant that we had to walk barefoot upon the earth.

It was pitch black in the cemetery. Pak Paeran scanned the surroundings using a battery-powered torch. He shone the light into a tall tree. It seemed to me like a scene from a horror movie; a group of people gathered in silence, the flickering light of bamboo torches revealing shadowy glimpses of faces and tombstones. Despite myself, I found that I was afraid to follow the beam of Pak Paeran's torch into the branches and leaves of the giant tree looming overhead.

Pak Paeran crouched under the tree to burn incense to invoke the spirit of the dead to possess the doll. After about twenty minutes, he put a *kanthil* (*Michelia champaca* L.) bud into the bosom of the doll. The deed was done. Pak Paeran told me that the doll had been possessed by the spirit of a dead woman named Nyi Roro Wardia Sih, a woman not personally known to anyone in the party. We left the cemetery and walked back to Pak Suwardi's home. On the return journey, the women sang *Padha mupu bocah bajang, rambute arang abang* to the same tune as the song they sang on their outward journey.

In the meantime, a gamelan orchestra had been set up in the courtyard of Pak Suwardi's house. A space of about four meters square had been laid out with straw mats. The musicians—ten men dressed in uniform burgundy, some wearing the distinctive Yogyakarta turban—were lined along one side of the performing space. When our party came into view, they struck up the tune that the women were



FIGURE 3. The Sabdo Budoyo performance, Grudo Panjangrejo village, in Pundong, Bantul, 27 June 2009. In the foreground in the green tunic is Pak Paeran, the *pawang*. Photograph by author.

singing, but an up-tempo version. The women sat down in a second line. My party of five formed the audience on a third side, while a small crowd of about fifteen villagers watched from the fourth side.

Four women came forward to form a cluster at the center. They sat upon their heels holding the Nini Towong doll high over their heads. They began to bounce the doll vigorously. The other women sang, while clapping their hands to a rousing rendition of the children's song *Ilir-Ilir*, and, as if touched by the rhythm, the doll moved faster and faster, its arms and shawl swinging left and right (FIGURE 3).

We were invited to take turns holding the doll. Three women continued to hold on to the bamboo handles while the fourth ceded her place to the guest who came forward when his or her name was read out by Pak Paeran. When it was my turn, I took hold of one bamboo handle in one hand as instructed. Perhaps this made the doll seem unusually heavy to me. The swinging and bouncing caused the bamboo handle to cut into the flesh of my palm, and I gave up after less than five minutes.

The men in my party fared better for they said they went with the momentum. One described the experience as akin to Chinese dragon dancing when a cloth-and-bamboo dragon is held aloft and swung by a troupe to make it seem as if the beast is writhing in the air. Another reported that he was able to affect the trajectory of the swing of the Nini Towong doll by varying his hold on the handle. Whether people manipulated the doll, or whether it moved on its own accord, Nini Towong began to swing low and in a wide arc so that people holding onto it were forced to bend forward to prevent their heads from being hit by the doll (FIGURE 4). This elicited much laughter from the audience which had by now swelled to perhaps thirty adults and children. When the doll continued to swing



FIGURE 4. Nini Towong swings low and wide. Photograph by author.



FIGURE 5. Pak Paeran fanning Nini Towong when she was hot from dancing. Photograph by author.



FIGURE 6. Pak Paeran's magic agate stone held in his palm. Photograph by author.

in this way, Pak Paeran told it off for being naughty. The doll, behaving like a little girl, snuggled her head upon Pak Paeran's bosom. He acted the father figure, chiding and cajoling Nini Towong, fanning her when she was hot from dancing (FIGURE 5). He also held up a mirror to the doll.

HUGRONJE (1906, 206) had written that the mirror was the vehicle through which the spirit entered and animated the Nini Towong doll, a suggestion that has since been repeated in other texts, but Pak Paeran told me that the mirror is only for the doll to admire itself. The power to invoke a spirit into the doll came not from the mirror, he said, but a magic, creamy-brown, oval agate stone which he kept wrapped in paper in his pocket (FIGURE 6). In Indonesia, it is popularly believed that agate stones can serve as repositories for possessing spirits.

The performance lasted about an hour-and-a half with the women and orchestra performing a list of seventeen songs that included popular numbers such as *Gambang Semarang* and one entitled *Pariwisata Njajah Desa*, a song welcoming tourists to the village. Midway through the show there was an interval for food and drinks when the doll also took a break from dancing. Finally, the *pawang* took hold of the doll to calm it down. He plucked the *kanthil* bud from its bosom and threw this away. The doll fell back, lifeless.

MYSTICISM DESPITE CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION

It was clear that I had seen Nini Towong as cultural commodity performed for the consumption of tourists. The costumed chorus and musicians, the beautiful doll and its endearing childlike behavior were embellishments that mitigated dark notions of spirit possession.

Pak Paeran told me how the Sabdo Budoyo Nini Towong developed from ritual to cultural showpiece. When he first became a Nini Towong *pawang* in 1963, Paeran performed to divine cures for illnesses, but he stopped this practice four years later. People were ungrateful, he explained, and he had to bear the brunt of the anger of the spirits who felt that they had not been sufficiently repaid for the boons they granted. Pak Paeran said Nini Towong used to be performed as a cleansing ceremony at the close of the harvest whenever a Sunday coincided with *Pon* of the five-day Javanese week.⁵ He said the last time the Nini Towong was staged as a cleansing ritual at Grudo Panjangrejo village was in 1995.

But although Nini Towong had been commodified, its roots in mysticism were not deeply buried away. There was the trip to the cemetery to invite the spirit of a dead person to possess the doll, and there were the songs "Padha mbuwang bocah bajang, rambute arang abang," which translates as "To abandon the child with sparse red hair," and "Padha mupu bocah bajang, rambute arang abang," which is "To adopt the child with sparse red hair." The first action suggests the abandoning, even the murder, of a *bocah bajang*, a deformed newborn. The second song is about recalling the spirit of a dead child (a fuller discussion follows). The song sets out the popular belief that Nini Towong is possessed by a *bocah bajang*. Despite this reference to dark magic, the lyrics of the *Mupu bocah bajang* song sung that night in Bantul included a homily urging listeners to work hard and not just sit

around “shaking their legs” (a popular phrase meaning idling). It reminded people to think of God and to become pillars of society by observing the principles of Pancasila.⁶ The politically correct reference to the state ideology in a song named for the *bocah bajang* spirit showed the reach of curatorial and custodial power even to a magical ritual performed in a rural village.

THE BOCAH BAJANG

The mystical idea of the *bocah bajang* is of a deformed child, despised and abandoned, even murdered.⁷ A *bocah bajang* has been described as “a stunted child; a child whose hair has never been cut” (ROBSON and WIBISONO 2002, 65). Another suggestion is a “spirit malignant to pregnant women and to infants” (STEVENS and SCHMIDGALL-TELLINGS, eds. 2004, 78 and 146). Usually a baby has its first hair shaved off in a naming ceremony when it is about five days old, thus the spirit of a dead unshaven child is one who has not lived long enough to be recognized as a human soul. The stunted *bocah bajang* spirit is magically powerful, like the retinue of dwarves and albinos kept by Javanese kings as a source of the ruler’s kingly power (ANDERSON 1990, 27; RICKLEFS 1998, 223).

Nini Towong is also a *bocah bajang* in her personification as Dewi Sri, the rice goddess. The myth tells of a murdered bride-to-be. Rice plants and food crops sprouted from her corpse. Denied marriage and the fruitfulness of her womb, Dewi Sri offered her body to be eaten thus transferring her fertility to food for the people. Reflecting this notion of life reborn after death, harvest rituals in the sub-district of Kerek, near Tuban, are annual communal enactments that take place on the graves of the ancestors at the start of a new agricultural cycle (HERINGA 1997, 370). This perhaps explains why the spirit that possesses the Nini Towong doll has to be invited at a cemetery.

THE IDENTITY OF NINI TOWONG

Rassers noted that Nini Towong is the name of a female servant character accorded only passing mention in two shadow puppet dramas, “Pandupapa” and “Sudamala.” In the latter play she is married to Semar, the Javanese ancestral deity, so that RASSERS proposed Nini Towong as the female ancestor of the Javanese people (1982, 36). Hazeu offered two suggestions: he proposes Nini Towong as a *widadari* (celestial nymph), an invited spirit of Indian origin (HAZEU 1901 in RASSERS 1982, 35), and then posits Nini Towong as a character in Malayo-Polynesian spiritualism (34–35). JORDAAN proposed Nini Towong as Nyai Lara Kidul, the Javanese goddess of the sea, on the basis of the water elements in the performance—Nini Towong’s head is a water scoop, and she is often made with a basket fish trap (1984, 104). Jordaan further notes that Lara Kidul is the chthonian Malayo-Polynesian deity of agriculture, equivalent to the Hindu Dewi Sri (JORDAAN 1984, 110 and 113, note 10). The many possible identities for Nini Towong remind us that any attempt to ascribe origins of folkloric figures can at best be speculative.

ZIGU CHINESE SPIRIT-BASKET DIVINATION

It is with this warning fully in mind that I link Nini Towong to the goddess Zigu of Chinese spirit-basket divination through the common element of the *bocah bajang* (the frustrated spirit). Zigu (紫姑; Purple Lady) is the Chinese goddess of the latrine, where “Zi” is a genteel homonym for toilet, *ce* (厕). Zigu legends tell of a secondary wife who was murdered in the privy by the jealous first wife. In ancient times latrines were built over pig pens from which night soil and dung could be collected for essential fertilizers (ZHANG 2001, 78; LIN 2008, 5). The economic aspect of the latrine is signalled in the Chinese character for toilet 厕 which includes the radicals for “factory” 厂 (*chang*) and “shell money” 贝 (*bei*). Thus, the death of Zigu relates how a murdered young bride transfers the potential fruitfulness of her womb to the agricultural crop. The Heavenly Emperor, having taken pity upon the murdered Zigu, had made her the goddess of the latrine (CHAO 1942, 26). Zigu has been invoked in spirit-basket divination from as early as the fifth century (CHAO 1942; JORDAN and OVERMYER, 1986; QIN 2010).

Originally, only women took part in Zigu divination, but by Song times the literati, including male scholars, would invite the goddess to move their writing and painting brushes. By then not only Zigu but also other spirits, even the ghosts of dead men, began to possess the basket. Importantly, what had been a woman’s game began to be played by men (CHAO 1942, 20–21). A nineteenth-century account of an encounter by Europeans of Chinese spirit-basket divination reported in *Chambers’s Journal*, a popular weekly out of Edinburgh, and later London, might provide us with an answer to the question, “Why female Javanese Nini Towong and male Chinese *jelangkung*?” The séance described in *Chambers’s* involved a male medium with boys supporting the basket. The *Chambers’s* report also observed how the practice of spirit-basket divination had invaded Ningbo (a seaport in Zhejiang province) like “an epidemic: there was scarcely a house in which it was not practiced for a season almost daily” (CHAMBERS and CHAMBERS 1854). Perhaps *jelangkung* is this latter-day vulgar game played by men for amusement, introduced by nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants into the urban centers of Indonesia, whereas Nini Towong is a cultural involution of Zigu spirit-basket divination that had come to Indonesia at an earlier time.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN ZIGU
SPIRIT-BASKET DIVINATION AND NINI TOWONG

The striking similarities between Zigu spirit-basket divination and Nini Towong performances make a compelling argument for a connection between both practices. In Zigu spirit-basket divination, the spirit of Zigu is invited into an effigy usually made with a ladle for the head and a winnowing basket for the body (CHAO 1942, 15–18). A favorite time to play Chinese spirit-basket divination is during the night of a full moon when the *yin* energy (the sun represents *yang* energy) is at its fullest. The best time to summon Nini Towong is also when there is a *bulan purnama* (full moon) (RASSERS 1982, 37). In the Nini Towong possession, game old women make the doll and invite the spirit to enter the doll (RASSERS



FIGURE 7. The Nini Towong doll at Indonesia's National Museum is clearly a basket effigy. Photograph used with the kind permission of Bambang Areongbinang. See the website Areongbinang Travelog. (This entry is no longer available although in a more recent posting Areongbinang notes that there used to be a Nini Thowok doll in the Museum Nasional Jakarta.)

1982, 31–32), or the *simur* coconut-shell bailer that makes the head of the doll must be stolen from an old maid (KARTOMI 1973, 180). Matrons, not young girls, take Nini Towong to the cemetery (HUGRONJE 1906, 206), and this was how it was with the Sabdo Budoyo performance I observed. In Zigu spirit-basket divination, the basket has been described as draped with an old woman's dress (ELLIOTT 1990, 146). Then there is the crucial shared element of the basket body. Several texts describe the Nini Towong doll's body as being fashioned out of basketry, including a winnowing sieve, bamboo rice steamer, or fishing creel (HUGRONJE 1906, 206; KARTOMI 1973, 1980; RASSERS 1982, 31; Pak Suwardi interview quoted above). There is a nineteenth-century Nini Towong doll in the ethnography collection of the Museum Nasional Republik Indonesia (National Museum of Indonesia, popularly known as Museum Nasional Jakarta, also known as Museum Gajah) in Jakarta (SITOWATI and MIKSIC 2006, 135) where the basket is clearly visible (FIGURE 7). More recently, KARTOMI (1973, 179–89) described a *Tjowongan*, a rainmaking ritual that she witnessed on 14 January 1970 in Desa Ajam Alas in the Banjumas area of the district of Kroja, near the central southern Javanese coast. Her account includes a photograph of the ceremony, which involved a Nini Towong doll made with a plaited bamboo rice-steamer body (KARTOMI 1973, 181).

IGNORING SINIC INFLUENCES UPON INDONESIAN CULTURE

Edward B. TYLOR (1879) proposed that when games of a complex nature are found in different geographical locations, the evidence makes the anthropolog-

ical argument for cultural diffusion having taken place, since the complexity of games argues against their having “sprung up independently” at later locations. The thesis that Nini Towong is derived from Chinese spirit-basket divination has merit, but the point of this article is not to argue the origin of Nini Towong. This writer’s view follows the arguments made by VAN BINSBERGEN that cultural involution can endow a borrowed item so completely with the recipient symbolism and cosmology that the resultant product cannot be other than uniquely localized (1996–1997, 239). Besides, sieve divination has also been reported in Europe and India (CHAO 1942, 21), an observation that in itself does not negate the Chinese origin of basket/sieve divination; for example, BODDE ascribes China as the source for games played worldwide, including card games, dominoes, and kite-flying (2002–2013). Rather than belabor the point of origin, the arguments for a Nini Towong Chinese spirit-basket connection made here seeks to foreground the dearth of attention given to Sinic contributions in Western scholarship on Indonesian cultural heritage (see also the arguments in DRAKELEY 2005, 14).

For example, HURGRONJE asserts that South India is the birthplace of much of Malay and Achehnese literature even though he admits that he is “unable even to fix the portion of South-India where the threads meet which unite that country with the mental life of the Indonesians” (1906, 122). BRAKEL-PAPENHUYZEN connects the Javanese *Jaka Tarub* fable with the fourteenth-century tale of Rajput Pabuji Dhandhal Rathaur (2006, 75–76). But the tale of a hero who steals the garments of one of seven divine nymphs he spies bathing is more persuasively argued as a rendition of the Chinese “Cowherd and the Weaver Maid” legend, which dates back three thousand years. This is the acknowledged originary myth of the Tanabata festival in Japan and the Chilseok celebrations of Korea.⁸ The love of the “Cowherd and the Weaver Maid” is celebrated by the Qixi (七夕) “Festival of the Double Seven” on the seventh day of the seventh moon, the most portentous day for Chinese spirit-basket divination (CHAO 1944, 5).

Historian SOMERS HEIDHUES discusses the contradiction of the definite presence of the Chinese in Indonesia and the absence of presence in the social narratives of Indonesian culture. She attributes the situation to indigenous anti-Chinese sentiments and early European fascination with Indonesian archaeology (2010, 10).⁹ To this list we can add Western Sinophobia.

EXCLUDING THE CHINESE VOICE IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN CULTURAL NARRATIVES

Western Sinophobia was born out of Sinophilia. ZHANG (2008) writes how rapturous reports from Jesuit missionaries in sixteenth-century China ignited the imagination of Enlightenment thinkers, but produced a backlash. Rising European imperialism in the eighteenth century needed justification, and European dynamism in trade and the sciences was reified against a Chinese model where the longevity of Chinese historiography, admired by Voltaire, was turned on its head and made to become an attribute of stagnation.

This philosophical about-turn found a more prosaic iteration among the Europeans who came out to Southeast Asia in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. They were merchants, and it was the “pariah capitalism” of the Chinese minority communities that caught the colonizer’s eye (CHUN 1989). The Europeans disparagingly compared the Chinese to the Jews (REID 2010, 375–77). European anti-Semitic anti-Sinicism provided King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1910–1925) reason for the repudiation of the Chinese. He defined the Thai national identity against the ethnic Other of the Chinese who were the “The Jews of the Orient” (VELLA and VELLA 1978, 194; RENARD 2006, 308–12). In 1938, Luang Wichitwathakan, Thailand’s Director General of the Department of Fine Arts,¹⁰ proposed that Siam should emulate Nazi policies in dealing with the country’s “own Jews” (BARMÉ 1993, 129).

Nineteenth-century American and European anti-Chinese sentiments took on a racist bent in Yellow Peril anxieties, fetishized in offensive cartoon caricatures in the popular press, a medium that had great influence upon public opinion. Reductionist cultural stereotypes continued into the twentieth century with Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, and Mickey Rooney’s yellow face portrayal (complete with taped eyelids, over-sized spectacles, buck teeth, and sibilant accent) in the 1961 movie *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. More recently we have Bowring’s Lee Kuan Yew obituary for *The Guardian* in which he described Lee as “a ‘banana’—yellow on the outside, white inside ... with all the intolerance of a Chinese emperor.” Lee, BOWRING pronounced, “did not create modern Singapore’s prosperity. The city state thrived naturally in a region of economic growth and rapid development of world trade” (22 March 2015). In a 2008 interview, Rooney said that it broke his heart to learn that many Asian Americans had found his *Breakfast* turn as Mr. Yunioshi offensive, and that he would not have played the part if he had known. He said that the director Blake Edwards hired him for the role, “and we had fun doing it” (MAGAGNINI, 7 September 2008).

This is an important point. We might self-reflexively ask if an insidious Sinophobia comes into the phrasing of our language; for example, in academic writing we have REID (2009), CHUN (1996), and YAO’s description of the Chinese diaspora as the Chinese race “without the shackles of China” (2009, 258). SHIH (2011) is less compelling in her need to justify the repudiation of China. Her arguments for an alternative discourse that can account for Chineseness outside the boundaries of a national China are more persuasive in her earlier, more straightforward discussion of Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian as “a writer who happens to write in Chinese and [who] may live anywhere in the world” (SHIH 2004, 26). It may all be mere rhetoric, but the tense situation in the South China Sea asks for more circumspection than the comparison by former president of the Philippines Benigno Aquino of China with Nazi Germany in a *New York Times* interview (BRADSHER 2014), and in a speech he delivered at the Upper House of the Japanese parliament in June 2015 (TAKENAKA 2015).

In his naming of Jews and Chinese as “essential outsiders” who are the targets of xenophobia, CHIROT grimly noted that while Jewish genocide might have blunted European anti-Semitism, the situation of the Chinese in Southeast Asia



FIGURE 8. Muslim high school girls performing in a Chinese temple procession. Jakarta, 17 October 2009. Photograph by author.

remains precarious (1997, 3–4). REID’s (2009, 293) catalogue of anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia in modern times—1945, 1947, 1959–1960, 1963, 1965–1967, 1973, 1980, 1994, and 1996–1998—supports this view. More recently, in November and December 2016, the protests against the ethnic Chinese Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) governor of Jakarta for alleged blasphemy has taken racist overtones. We also note REID’s (2010) investigation into the possibility that the Chinese of Southeast Asia might be targets for anti-Semitic hostility. We note his concluding advice that racism should never be taken lightly.

Against these dark closing thoughts, we look for hope in the unselfconscious side-by-side arrangement of Javanese Nini Towong next to Chinese *jelangkung* in the Surabaya museum. The display is as artless as the way the lion dance is performed, even outside the Chinese New Year festive season, by Javanese youths going shop-to-shop in Jakarta’s Glodok Chinatown. It is as unselfconscious as the performance of Chinese dragon dance by soldiers from the Yon Armed-II Kostrad, a land artillery battalion of the Indonesian Army’s Strategic Reserve that I saw in a Jakarta Chinese temple procession in 2009. The men, in their army uniforms, participated alongside two Muslim high school marching bands and a contingent of girls wearing headscarves who twirled large flags (see FIGURE 8).

No one seemed to find it remarkable that Muslims were taking part in a Chinese temple procession. It was straightforward; the soldiers, students, and lion dance troupes were performing for a fee. It was not a matter of religion, and everything was in order in the quotidian.

NOTES

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1. MANTOVANI and POERNOMO's *Jelangkung* (2001) was the top box office hit of its year, drawing the highest sales record in Indonesian history at that time.

2. An examination of spirit-basket divination is included in a discussion of the sociopolitical performance practices of the Chinese of Singkawang, West Kalimantan (CHAN 2012).

3. Personal interview with Didik Nini Thowok in English, at Yogyakarta on 27 June 2009. Didik Nini Thowok is a moniker; the dancer is Didik Hadiprayitno.

4. Email correspondence with Didik Nini Thowok, 9–24 June 2009.

5. The Javanese *pasar* uses a five-day week. The five days are *Legi*, *Pahing*, *Pon*, *Wagé*, and *Kliwon*.

6. See also RASSERS (1982). The song that I had heard in Bantul in June 2009 must have been a later version for Pancasila was promulgated only in 1945.

7. For example, in the 1975 film *Penghuni Bangunan Tua* [Spirit of the old building; SHARIEFFUNDIN 1975], the spirit of a murdered boy possesses an effigy to haunt the youths who had summoned it. The story of the vengeful spirit of a murdered boy also featured in the film *Jelangkung* (MANTOVANI and POERNOMO 2001).

8. The story of Nui Lang 牛郎, the Cowherd, and Zhi Nu 织女, the Weaver Maid, is referenced in the Qin Jian 秦简 bamboo-strip books found in the Shui Hu Di 睡虎地 excavation in Hubei province, China, in 1975. In the *Ri Shu* 日书 *Day Book*, a divination diary, Jia Zhong Di Yi Wu Wu Jian 甲种第一五五简, bamboo slip number 155, the following is written: 戊申、己酉日牵牛迎娶(娶)织女、不果、三弃 [On the day of *wu shen* and *ji you*, Qian Niu and Zhi Nu's wedding ceremony cannot be sealed. If people marry on this day, the husband will abandon the wife within three years]. This suggests that the story of the “Cowherd and the Weaver Maid” probably preceded Qin. In the *Shijing* 诗经, dating to as early as 1000 BCE, the star Aquila, west of the Milky Way, was already named the Cowherd, and Vega, east of the Milky Way, was named the Weaver Maid (LI 2006, 97–98).

9. MIKSIC (2000) also reports on the bias in Southeast Asian archaeology for monumental orthogenetic sites. The evidence of small items such as money and ceramic shards at heterogenetic sites such as trade settlements where the Chinese congregated proved less compelling.

10. Wichitwathakan became Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1942–1943 under the fascist government of Plaek Phibunsongkhram (1938–1944).

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