Research Note

"Assimilationism" versus "Integrationalism" Revisited: The Free School of the Khong Kauw Hwee Semarang

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Despite the Indonesian state’s unfavourable policies towards Chinese culture and religion, the free school run by the Semarang Confucian Society has survived across more than six decades. Its history from 1950 to 2010 serves as a case study of Chinese Indonesian adaptability. It also provides a vehicle for revisiting the debate of the late 1950s and early 1960s between “assimilationists” and “integrationists” over the position of Chinese in the Indonesian nation. The school’s longevity was the result of its administrators’ undertaking various measures to ensure not only that they would escape being penalized by the state for their Chinese ethnicity and religion but also that they would gain official acceptance for providing a valuable service to the Indonesian nation. Viewed from the perspective of today’s more culturally inclusive Indonesia, the case of the Taman Kanak-kanak-Sekolah Dasar Kuncup Melati offers an example of both Chinese survival and Indonesian adaptability.

Keywords: assimilation, integration, Indonesia, Chinese minority, Confucianism, Khong Kauw Hwee Semarang.

On a Saturday afternoon in October 2010, as I was exploring the old Chinese quarter of Semarang on the north coast of Java, I walked into a three-storey school compound. The sounds of karaoke from the top floor of the building led me to a group of elderly Indonesians
of Chinese descent belting out old Chinese songs in front of an altar on which rested a statue of Confucius.

I later discovered that this building housed the Taman Kanak-kanak-Sekolah Dasar Kuncup Melati (Jasmine Buds Kindergarten-Elementary School), a free school run by the Khong Kauw Hwee Semarang (Semarang Confucian Society, KKH) for children aged four to eleven. Although the building dated from 1992, the school had a much longer history.

Since 1950 the school had been run and managed by the KKH, and supported by other ethnic Chinese organizations in Semarang. First established as a course to provide basic literacy skills and teach Confucian values to children whose parents were too poor to send their children to school, it later became a fully fledged school that followed the Indonesian national curriculum.

The school’s foundation would not have stood out as a strange development at the time, as the early 1950s saw high levels of enrolment in Chinese-medium schools in Indonesia (Suryadinata 1972, p. 64). Many Chinese then also viewed Confucianism as a fundamental constituent of Chinese culture; for a Chinese school to incorporate Confucianism into its school curriculum would thus not have been unexpected.

The 1950s were also a time during which the future of ethnic Chinese in the Indonesian nation became a topic of much discussion. One camp, the “assimilationists”, argued for the assimilation of Chinese into the new nation through the gradual loss of their cultural practices and norms, with the result that they could prove their total allegiance to Indonesia and that they no longer looked to China as their homeland. However, the “integrationists” of the other camp disagreed. The members of that camp, also locally born Chinese, believed that it was possible for Chinese to integrate into the nation just as other ethnic minorities did, and thus to become a recognized suku or tribe, while retaining their cultural practices and languages. The “integrationist” camp was represented by the Badan Permusjawaratan Kewarganegaraan Indonesia (Bapkeri, Consultative Body for Indonesian Citizenship), which became closely aligned
with the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) by 1964. In response, the "assimilationist" camp, which formed the Lembaga Pembina Kesatuan Bangsa (LPKB, Institute for the Development of National Unity) in 1963, found support from the anti-Communist sections of the military that were wary of Baperki's close association with the PKI. It became increasingly clear that the debate was not merely one between two groups of Chinese over their future in the nation-state of Indonesia, but was closely intertwined with Indonesian domestic politics, with both camps trying to win the support of powerful individuals, including President Sukarno (Somers 1964, pp. 36–39; Purdey 2003, pp. 424–26).

A survey of the events affecting people of Chinese origin in Indonesia in the decades following the founding of the KKH's school reveals a climate in which open displays of an ethnic Chinese identity became increasingly difficult. For example, the 1950s saw negotiations between Indonesia and the People's Republic of China over the citizenship status of Chinese in the former (Willmott 1961, pp. 44–47). These negotiations coincided with the debates between assimilationists and integrationists among the Peranakan Chinese themselves. With the change in political regime from Sukarno's Guided Democracy to Suharto's New Order, Baperki was outlawed for its close links with the PKI, and LPKB became the officially recognized representative of the Chinese in Indonesia (Purdey 2003, p. 425). As a result, Chinese were fearful that they would become the targets of ethnic violence (Coppel 2003, pp. 327–28). During the New Order, various laws reflected an official determination to suppress manifestations of Chinese culture. Chinese schools were closed, and it was officially declared that Confucianism was not a religion despite its practice as one in some areas, and the use of Chinese languages in public places was banned (Suryadinata, 2004; Coppel 1983). The typical image of the Indonesian Chinese today is thus one of the "assimilated foreigner" — one who speaks principally Indonesian and can speak no Chinese, has an Indonesian name, and identifies with the nation. It seemed that the assimilation-versus-integration debate was decided in favour of the former, and
that the Indonesian state’s policy of dealing with the perceived "Chinese problem" during the New Order through a policy of forced assimilation had proved effective.

Despite this history of pressure on the Chinese community in Indonesia, the KKH's free school in Semarang has operated continuously. Not only is its survival an achievement that requires a historical explanation, but the free school’s history also offers us a vehicle for revisiting the debate between the assimilationists and integrationists in the late 1950s to early 1960s. An examination of the change and continuity reflected in that history sheds light on the local effects of a forced national assimilation policy. More broadly, it represents a possible model for approaches to understanding Indonesia’s history from the perspective of today’s Indonesia.

This research note examines the history of the KKH’s free school from the time of its founding in 1950 to 2010. Drawing on commemorative booklets and interviews, it explains the origins of the school and tracks two dimensions of changes that the school underwent during those sixty years — those of ethnicity and religion. The note focuses on the school’s transformation from one with an ethnic to one with a primarily national identity and on the changing position of Confucianism at the school. It argues that, by moving away from its Chinese and Confucianist roots to portray itself as an Indonesian institution, the free school adapted successfully to broader changes in the political and social environment. As a result, instead of being penalized by the Indonesian state for its Chinese ethnicity and association with a Chinese religion, it won acceptance for providing a valuable service to the Indonesian nation.

The story of the free school run by the KKH reveals the effects of the Indonesian state’s forced assimilation policy towards people of Chinese origin. That policy did not directly force the school to change, but the school adapted. Its leadership and backers assessed changing political and social conditions in Indonesia and decided on the adaptations necessary to ensure its survival. Paradoxically, while change came to the manner in which the school was run, the fundamental Chinese and Confucianist identity with which it started was never forgotten. Although the debate between the integrationists
and the assimilationists would seem to have ended in favour of the latter, the vision of the integrationists proved the enduring one. When faced with pressure to assimilate into the nation and to lose their cultural distinctiveness, Chinese communities such as that which backed the KKH’s free school skilfully adapted. In creating a national and multi-religious institution, the school’s backers did not concede to complete assimilation. Aspects of Chinese cultural identity were still retained to re-emerge more prominently with the end of the New Order.

This case study is not merely an example of Chinese survival, but one of Indonesian adaptability. The 1950s were an era of building, both for the school and the Indonesian nation. The school did not have a strong Indonesian identity, but instead saw itself in terms of its ethnic Chinese roots. The idea of Indonesia was also narrowly conceived, on secular, anti-colonial principles. Chineseness was thus viewed as a problem for the nation and an obstacle to nation-building. However, with the passing of time, the school developed a strong Indonesian identity as its leaders adapted to changing political and social conditions. In the story of how a Chinese community overseas negotiated a hybrid identity in response to its changing environment, we thus also have a microcosm of Indonesian national history. This national history only makes sense if viewed from the perspective of today’s Indonesia, which accepts and accommodates different streams of society. With the fall of Suharto in 1998 and the ushering in of the era of “reformasi”, religious pluralism and multiculturalism have been welcomed and celebrated rather than frowned upon as obstacles to nation-building. In the school’s retention of its Chinese identity, even as it also embraced different religions and languages and expressed its social function in national rather than ethnic terms, it came to be viewed as a successful example of what national education in Indonesia ought to be.

The Origins of the Free School of the Khong Kauw Hwee Semarang
On 27 August 1949, members of the KKH in Semarang and the city’s Chinese community gathered in its Chinese quarter at Gang
Lombok to celebrate the 2500th anniversary of the birth of the “Great Teacher” Confucius.

Attendees were not limited to members of the KKH but included people from the organizations located in the vicinity and leaders of the Semarang Chinese community. This event would go down in the pages of the school’s history as its founding event, as funds were raised to meet the school’s need for items such as furniture and stationary at the gathering (KKH 1960, p. 17). Present at the event were members of the four establishments — the Kong Tik Soe, Tjie Lam Tjay, Tay Kak Sie and Khong Kauw Hwee — that would play important roles in the free school’s founding and development.

The Kong Tik Soe (功德祠, Ancestral Hall of Merit) was an ancestral building that housed the funeral tablets of major contributors to the community and of those who had no heirs to pay respects to them after their demise. Carved in stone on the building was also the stated purpose that it was to be used for the poor and destitute, and to house a charity school for children in the area (Liem 1931, pp. 128–32). Besides being the physical site where the children could gather for lessons, its mission to provide education served as a reminder of the aspirations of Semarang’s early Chinese leaders. It was only in 1992 that the free school had its own building, situated next to the Kong Tik Soe. Nevertheless, various school activities continue to be carried out at the Kong Tik Soe, such as dance and martial arts lessons for the children, and the school’s founder Lie Ping Lien’s tablet is also housed in the central section of the structure.

Also located at the Kong Tik Soe building was the Tjie Lam Tjay (指南齋, Guidance Office), to which members of the Chinese community had been able to go for legal information in the nineteenth century, and which remained in charge of supervising temples, helping poor Chinese who had no money to bury their dead, and managing graveyards (Liem 1931, p. 125). While its importance in leading the Chinese community had diminished by the mid-1950s (Willmott 1960, p. 135), its function of serving the poor had not, as it continued its service of burying the poor whose families could not afford proper funeral services. It had also opened
a Chinese medical clinic as part of its efforts to serve the poor. This organization complemented the KKH’s free school in serving the poor Chinese community of all ages in the neighbourhood. Today, the Tjie Lam Tjay Foundation provides medical, dental and acupunctural services, and even has its own ambulance. It continues to carry out its historic service of providing free funeral and burial services for the poor, and it remains a significant pillar of support for the KKH’s free school.

Adjacent to the Kong Tik Sie was the Buddhist-Taoist Tay Kak Sie Temple (大覚寺, Temple of Great Awareness), the largest temple in Semarang’s Chinese quarter. It had been built in 1771 to house the statue of Kwan Im (观音, the Goddess of Mercy) because its location next to a river was deemed more favourable than the previous place at which local Chinese had worshipped the goddess. The leaders of the Chinese community had raised funds for its construction and even invited workmen from China to build it (Liem 1931, p. 61). This temple had come over time to house more Buddhist and Taoist deities, and even Confucius was worshipped there. After World War II, many Chinese who had fled from nearby towns because of anti-Chinese violence gathered at this temple to pray and left their children to play in its vicinity when they went in search of work. It was on observing the large number of poor and uneducated children at the temple that the leaders of the KKH decided to start their free course. Among the four organizations located at Gang Lombok, the Tay Kak Sie was the only one whose main function was, and indeed still is, of a religious rather than of a social nature. Furthermore, as the largest Chinese temple in Chinatown, it has long drawn visitors from various socio-economic backgrounds. It is likely that this temple’s sponsorship of the free school helped raise awareness among richer Chinese, who could — and continue today to — donate money to support the operations of the school.

The fourth organization, the Khong Kauw Hwee Semarang, had been founded in 1935 by two locally born men, Liem Khiem Siang and Souw Tiang Ing, who felt that an age of moral decline called for good moral instruction. Liem had given lectures on Confucius’s
teachings at the Kong Tik Soe building on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month until his death in March 1941, when his duties fell to Lie Ping Lien. World War II halted the KKH's activities, and it was only in August 1946 that Lie Ping Lien resumed his lectures, first at the Ta Chung Sze — a Chinese social club — and later at the Kong Tik Soe. The lectures were so well received that meetings were also held on the second and fourth week of the month. The society also published the teachings of Confucius and made them available to its members (KKH 1949, p. 17).

When the idea of a free course to eradicate illiteracy¹ was mooted and funds were raised to launch it, the KKH took on a new responsibility. Its leaders' motivations for starting this course were very similar to those of the founders of the KKH fifteen years earlier. Both groups of leaders believed that Chinese were losing their culture and society its morality.

The solution chosen by the post-war group was not just to lecture adults, but to teach children. Because there were many ethnic Chinese refugees in Semarang who had fled from smaller towns in Java such as Demak and Jepara during and after World War II,² many children were left to play near the temples in Chinatown, while their parents prayed or looked for work. The parents of these children were not likely to be able to send their children to school, as many of them had been uprooted from their homes and were struggling to survive.

Lie Ping Lien came up with the idea to start a short six-month course, which would take in some sixty children and ensure that they learnt the basic skills of reading and writing in basic Indonesian and Chinese and of counting. He was supported by Be Sik Tjong, a businessman from an elite Semarang Peranakan family, who contributed Rp. 1,000 to the project, as well as by Ong Yong Wie and Tan Ngo Siang. These locally born Chinese were the founders of the school. With funds gathered from donors and from selling advertising space in the 2500th anniversary publication, the group bought furniture and stationary (KKH 1960, p. 17). The KKH's free school opened its doors on 1 January 1950, and has operated ever since.
From Ethnic to National Identity

Among the most significant respects in which the KKH’s free school in Semarang has changed in the decades since its establishment is the way in which it has expressed its identity. In simple terms, it has gone from being a Chinese school to being an Indonesian school.

In the early days of the free school, the KKH saw service to the Chinese community of Semarang as its mission, and the free school served poor Chinese children whose parents could not afford to pay their school fees. The KKH’s early publications, which were written primarily in Indonesian, were addressed to the “Chinese race” (bangsa Tionghoa). They referred to the teachings of Confucius as “the way of the Chinese” (taonya Tionghoa) and repeatedly stressed that Chinese tradition was not to be separated from the teachings of Confucius. It was also assumed that the readership of these publications had some proficiency in the Chinese language, as there were frequent quotations from the teachings of Confucius in Chinese characters in their pages.

Gradually, however, these publications placed less emphasis on the community’s ethnic identity, and a strong nationalist rhetoric emerged. In 1960 the authors of a publication to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the school’s founding reflected:

Liken the Country/State [negara] to a father and the citizens [rakyat] to children. If the father is inconvenienced and in trouble, as far as possible we as children should not add to [the] burden and inconvenience of the father. (KKH 1960, pp. 15–17)

In other words, the free school’s administrators had come to stress their own and the school’s contribution to Indonesia rather than just to the members of a particular ethnic group. This change of emphasis may have been due to assimilationist pressures on the Chinese community of Semarang from the authorities, as in the same publication the Foreign Education Inspection Head of Semarang wrote that “National Awareness” (Kesadaran Nasional) needed to be “deepened” (diperdalam) so that the children would “realise … that they were also sons (putera-putera) of Indonesia who were
responsible for the welfare of the country and nation of Indonesia” (KKH 1960, p. 7). In any case, such changing rhetoric reflected the KKH’s transformation, one that became even clearer during the New Order, when certain obvious expressions of Chinese identity were hidden or removed.

For example, the school had a flute orchestra and a Yangqin (扬琴, Chinese hammered dulcimer) orchestra at least until 1960. However, during the New Order these instruments were hidden or discarded, as were many Chinese textbooks that the school had previously used, out of fear of sanctions for trying to hold on to Chinese culture. Similarly, the teaching of the Chinese national language, Guoyu or Mandarin, was a core subject at the time of the school’s founding (KKH 1951, p. 8). It is unclear when exactly it was removed from the curriculum, but the school certainly did not teach it for the duration of the New Order.

Central to the school’s survival, besides ceasing to teach Mandarin, were the teaching of Bahasa Indonesia and its use as the medium of instruction at the school. The school had taught Bahasa Indonesia alongside Mandarin from the time of its establishment, and so teachers and students did not face a situation in which they had to learn and adapt to a totally new language. It is telling that the national language had been regarded as important for the ethnic Chinese students to learn even in 1950, because it shows an awareness that it was necessary for survival and success in Semarang in particular and Indonesia in general. The use of the national language would also, of course, be an obvious outward demonstration of the school’s loyalty to Indonesia.

Even the school logo, which had originally contained Chinese characters, was mysteriously changed to one that only had geometric shapes from the 1960s onward. It was only in 2009 that the KKH decide to re-adopt the earlier logo, which, members of its new administrative board saw from older documents, was “the original logo in the first place”. The school’s increasing openness to using Chinese characters and even re-introducing Mandarin into the school’s curriculum came in a period of greater openness to expressions of Chinese identity after the end of the Suharto regime.
In 2010 the teachers and administrators were proud of running a school that was the first and longest-operating free school in Indonesia, and of its practice of accepting poor students regardless of religion or ethnicity. The school’s sixtieth-anniversary commemorative book explained that the KKH’s vision was to “bridge society’s social-cultural gap through education through the creation of intelligent and virtuous sons and daughters of the nation” (KKH 2010, p. 3). As Tanjung Pahala, the school’s moral education (budi pekerti) teacher, who had himself enrolled as a student at the KKH’s free school in 1955, told the author:

At the beginning, the KKH was developed with the Course to Eradicate Illiteracy, with the purpose to receive refugees, Chinese who were fleeing, whose children did not receive education.... However, after it was organized into the social, non-profit KKH Semarang Foundation, [it] cannot be specifically for Chinese people only. We live in Indonesia. The Indonesian people who are in difficulty are not few, all deserve [education]. Now, 75 per cent [of the school’s students] are of Indonesian descent, 25 per cent Chinese ... [It’s] the reverse. It may even not reach 25 per cent. Only 20 per cent. The majority [of students are] descendents of [ethnic] Indonesians.

The socio-political changes that Indonesian Chinese had to endure, such as the banning of the use of the Chinese language in public, had a lasting effect on the identity of the KKH and its school. From an organization that served the Chinese community of Semarang and promoted the teachings of Confucius, it transformed itself into one that served the nation of Indonesia.

From Confucianism to Multi-Religiosity

The second major change in the KKH free school during the decades between 1950 and 2010 concerns the place of Confucianism in the school. In the first decade of the school’s operation, its establishment as a means by which the KKH could apply Confucius’s teachings on education was unmistakable. To its founders, Confucius was a “Great Teacher” (Guru Besar, Maha Guru), a model for the Chinese race to follow. He was also a “Prophet” (Nabi), whose
moral teachings had to be taught to younger generations of ethnic Chinese. The teachings emphasized most were the Five Virtues (*lima kebaikan*, 五常) of Humaneness (*Djin*, 仁), Righteousness (*Gie*, 义), Propriety (*Lee*, 礼), Wisdom (*Tie*, 智) and Integrity (*Sien*, 信). These five values were seen as the founding principles of the KKH (KKH 1949, pp. 60-81).

The leadership of the KKH saw Confucianism as closely intertwined with Chinese culture and the free school as a means to teach and preserve that culture. According to the school’s founders, “people were wrongly using their intelligence to become most cruel murderers of fellow people of God”, and the KKH wished to “reduce the evil, or prevent it from increasing” by “helping neglected children, so that they receive a bit of education, with the hope that one day, they will follow proper lives and become people with good conduct” (KKH 1951, pp. 3, 5-6).

Religion was seen as essential to leading children to have good conduct, and in 1960 the guardians of the free school stressed that “children must be taught to pray according to the rules of religion”. This “spiritual education” (*pelajaran kebatinan*), they continued, “is learning how to live in obedience to God (Allah) and adhering to the lessons of the Prophet” (KKH 1960, p. 83). While it was not explicitly stated to which religion the KKH was referring in the 1960 publication, or which Prophet, one can deduce that the religion was Confucianism. From the time of the school’s establishment, Lie Ping Lien taught Confucian studies to the children. A statue of Confucius was also built with an altar for the followers of Confucianism and the children to offer sacrifices and pray.

However, whether the KKH wanted in its early years to spread the teachings of Confucius as a moral set of values to live by or as an organized religion to be practiced remains a matter of some ambiguity. Although Suryadinata writes that the KKH was formed in various parts of Java to spread Confucianism (2003, p. 267), one cannot assume that the view that Confucianism was a religion held uniformly among the Chinese of Java. For example, although Lie Ping Lien was described as a “model Confucian gentleman and
scholar" (Willmott 1960, p. 250) and gave lectures on and founded a school based on Confucius's teachings, he is in fact remembered as having used Buddhist rites. In other words, Confucianism was more of philosophy by which he sought to live a moral life than a religion.

Whether or not the members of the KKH Semarang actually viewed Confucianism as a religion, by the 1970s the group had declared Confucianism its official religion as recognized under Pancasila. This declaration responded to the Suharto regime's battle against Communism, as every Indonesian citizen had to have an official religion in order to avoid being labelled as a Communist. In August 1967, with the support of government officials, "the General Organisation of Khong Kauw Hwee held its sixth congress in Solo". At this congress, as Stiryadinata put it, "Confucianism was transformed into a 'real' Indonesian religion", as the national Confucian religious association became known as the Supreme Council of the Confucian Religion of Indonesia (Majelis Tertinggi Agama Khonghucu Indonesia, or MATAKIN). Instead of the Chinese term meaning Confucian Society or Confucius Study Society (Khong Kauw Hwee), the Indonesian term meaning the Confucian religion (Agama Khonghucu) was adopted (2007, pp. 268-69).

Unlike elsewhere, in Semarang the KKH did not at this time become a religious organization. Perhaps this was because a Majelis Agama Khonghucu Indonesia (MAKIN, Council for Confucian Religion in Indonesia) existed in the city to carry out the religious duties of performing rites and giving lectures. Nevertheless, the KKH in Semarang significantly changed its view of the Confucian religion during the 1970s. In 1975 the KKH published another booklet, this time to celebrate the free school's twenty-fifth anniversary. This publication differed greatly from the 1960 booklet, which had barely made any mention of Confucius. The later booklet was peppered with references to the "Prophet Confucius" (Nabi Khong Hu Cu), "Confucian religion" (agama Khonghucu), and "God" (Allah) or "Heaven" (Thian, 天). For example, Goei Thwan Sien, the head of the Kong Tik Soe ancestral hall that housed the free school wrote in his introduction:
but with the strong desire from the leaders this *Taman Pendidikan* [kindergarten] stands until now and has produced people who are responsible and useful in our society by developing the teachings of our teacher the Prophet Khong Cu who is recognised by our Nation which is built upon the Indonesian Constitution based on Pancasila (KKH 1975, p. 4).

This reference to Pancasila was not a one-off mention. The Indonesian state’s founding ideology includes “Belief in one God” as the first of its five principles. On a page entitled, “What is the *Taman Pendidikan Anak-anak Khong Kauw Semarang*?”, the publication explained that this social body providing free education was based on the “Agama Khongcu — Pancasila” (p. 12). A deliberate attempt in the 1970s to present Confucianism as the founding religion of the school — rather than merely a philosophy — and to show that the school was thus legitimate in the eyes of the state becomes clear.

The KKH’s rhetoric was similar to that of other Confucianists in Semarang, and across Java, who had at that time come under the umbrella of MATAKIN. A publication to celebrate the 2528th birthday of Confucius in Semarang in October 1977 also stressed the religion’s recognition by the state under Pancasila, not least through its inclusion of the Garuda and the text of the five principles and its references to the Indonesian Constitution. The publication also defended the status of Confucianism as a religion just like Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and other world religions with quotations from various English-language books on the subject.

The similarities among the KKH’s, MAKIN’s and MATAKIN’s defences of Confucianism as a world religion under Pancasila suggest that the default position of the former’s free school run was to think of itself and to present itself as a Confucian institution. The KKH also worked to retain this Confucian identity by participating in a broader movement that wanted state recognition of Confucianism as a religion for Chinese. However, by the 1980s the stances of MAKIN and the KKH Semarang had come to differ. While MAKIN did not alter its stance that Confucianism was a religion, the KKH adopted a more pragmatic approach in the operation of its free school, even
if that meant ceasing its discourse on Confucianism and adopting another religion as part of its curriculum.

This course resulted not least from the declaration in a meeting of the Indonesian cabinet on 27 January 1979 that Confucianism was not an officially recognized religion.¹² This declaration meant that individuals could no longer register themselves as Confucianists in obtaining identity cards, and that schools could not teach Confucianism as religious education in accordance with the national curriculum.

In a 1992 study on Confucianism as an emerging form of religious life among the Indonesian Chinese, Lasiyo notes that “although it is not accepted as one of the officially recognised religions, Indonesian Confucianism is still allowed to be practiced” (1992, p. 67). Nevertheless, the Semarang KKH took no chances, and by the time that the academic year began in May 1979, it had engaged the services of two Hindu studies teachers to teach Hinduism to the children of the school. One of them, Pak Kasyanto, who was then working at the Department of Religion and also teaching Hinduism in various schools, was directed by his superior in the department to teach at the KKH’s school. When asked how he became involved in the school, Pak Kasyanto explained that the government had decreed that every student in Indonesia had to receive religious education but Confucianism was not among the five officially recognized religions. The Semarang KKH thus had to choose one out of those five religions as part of the curriculum at the school, and it had decided on Hinduism. The Department of Religion was then requested (diminta) to provide teachers to teach the Hindu religion at the free school.¹³

The choice of Hinduism was a curious one. According to Pak Kasyanto, the reason for it was that Hinduism was the closest match to Confucianism. He explains:

At that time, the situation wasn’t as conducive as today, such that, if they choose Buddhism, there is a central figure [the Buddha] already, according to them. If here there is Confucius as central figure, it would become dualism. This was according to them.
Indeed, in Buddhism, there is Tri Dharma, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Indeed there is. But this is within a single whole unit, [and] it cannot be separated from the rest. While Khong Kauw [Confucianism] is alone. Because of that, it chose Hinduism as an alternative ... to give religious education in that school.14

When asked why the school did not choose another religion such as Islam or Christianity, Pak Kasyanto replied that they chose a religion with a philosophy that is the “closest to” (terdekat), or “not far” (tidak jauh) from, Khong Kauw or Confucianism. Furthermore, he added that the Hinduism taught in the school was not given “on a total scale” (secara totalitas), meaning that they avoided teaching rituals and focused more on the ethics and philosophy of Hinduism.15

On the other hand, Pak Eko, the secretary of the KKH since 2009, was of the view that it was a coincidence that his predecessors had met a Hindu official in the Department of Religion who was willing to help the school replace Confucianism with Hinduism in the school’s curriculum.16

There is no clear answer to the question of why the KKH in Semarang chose Hinduism as its school’s official religion. It is possible that it did not choose Buddhism because of its association with many ethnic Chinese, and that Hinduism represented a more syncretic and inclusive religion than any of the other four official religions. In that case, it would be possible to practice Confucianism alongside it. What is clear is that the choice of Hinduism protected the school from facing state pressure to shut its doors.

What then happened to the Confucian studies lessons that had been offered from 1950 to 1979? While Hinduism became the official religion of the school, Confucianism was “hidden”17 under the guise of “moral education” (pendidikan budi perketi). It was still taught, but was no longer presented as a religion.

The publication issued to celebrate the thirty-second anniversary of the school’s founding in 1982 also reflected the change in its approach to Confucianism. As in the 1975 publication, this later publication
repeatedly mentioned Pancasila in order to stress the school’s loyalty to the Indonesian nation-state. It stated that the school “provide[d] religious moral education [pendidikan moral beragama] so that they [students] would become people of good conduct, useful for the homeland [berguna bagi Nusa dan Bangsa]” (KKH 1982, p. 5). It made not a single mention of Confucius nor of which religion the school was teaching. Also, references to God used the Indonesian word “Tuhan” instead of the Chinese word “Tian” (“天”; literally meaning “heaven”) that had been previously used.

This approach contrasted to that of MATAKIN Semarang, whose stance continued to be that Confucianism was a religion and should be recognized as one (Kenang-kenangan 1985, p. 6). In other words, there was a split in the Confucian movement in Semarang. While MAKIN and MATAKIN continued to stress that Confucianism was a religion, Semarang’s KKH did not. Instead, it adopted a pragmatic stance to ensure the survival of its school. So successful was this approach that in 1982 a government official even suggested that the school had the potential to become a “Pancasila cultural centre” (pusat kebudayaan Pancasila) (KKH 1982, p. 10). One must understand this statement in light of the school’s effort to integrate many religions both by teaching Hinduism despite its Confucian roots and also by accepting students and hiring teachers of different faiths.

The pragmatic stance that the KKH adopted in the late 1970s and 1980s has endured ever since. In the 2009/2010 academic year, 54 per cent of the students enrolled in the primary school section of Kuncup Melati were Muslims. Of the remainder, 27 per cent were Christians (Protestants), 10 per cent Buddhists and 9 per cent Catholics. Neither did its teachers come predominantly from any one religious group, although the ethnic Chinese board of directors comprises mostly Buddhists. As Indonesian society evolved and as many members of the original target population of the school — ethnic Chinese — moved up the social ladder, the school also evolved, from one whose identity was rooted in serving Chinese to one that served Indonesians more generally, and from one narrowly focused on spreading the teachings of Confucianism to one seeking to
provide a service to the nation. It thus uniquely positions itself as an agent advocating tolerance among multiple religions in Indonesia.

Parents or guardians of the students interviewed in 2010 were largely ambivalent about the fact that the school was multi-religious, taught their children Hinduism or had Confucianist roots. On two different occasions parents expressed to the author their conviction that there was no problem with the school’s teaching various religions because they and their children were not “fanatic” (fanatik) in their religious beliefs. The more important issue to them was that the school did not charge fees; they were for that reason willing to accept whatever the school teaches.\(^\text{17}\)

The school also prides itself on exposing students to inter-religious understanding through field trips to religious sites. This is a more recent development, as field trips in the 1950s were primarily to gardens, zoos or orphanages. It reflects a new and deliberate strategy adopted by the school administration to show that its origins as a Chinese, Confucianist school do not prevent it from actively contributing to religious understanding and tolerance among Indonesians.

Beyond Survival: The Free School’s Place in Indonesian History

This research note began by describing the KKH Semarang’s free school as the author first encountered it in 2010. In that year it was celebrated as being the longest-operating free school in Indonesia, a remarkable achievement in a politically volatile environment. The note has discussed the origins of the school by introducing the community that supported its foundation and development. It has focused on two major changes that have marked its history: its transformation from an ethnic Chinese institution to become a national, Indonesian one and the change in the status of Confucianism in the school. Both symbolic changes (for example, changing the school’s logo and name) and substantive changes (not officially teaching Mandarin or Confucianism, incorporating Hinduism into its curriculum) defined a pattern of adaptation on the part of the KKH that, along with
the strong community support that the school received, enabled the school to survive the many decades of political and social change. Some changes made during the New Order period were reversed after 1998. For example, the school readopted its original logo featuring Chinese characters and began to teach some Mandarin in its classes. At the same time, certain elements of a Chinese cultural identity were retained over the years despite the changes, such as the maintaining of Confucian teachings under various names. While some adaptations were irreversible and permanent, such as the school’s taking the Indonesian name of Kuncup Melati and the teaching of Hinduism as religious studies, the school managed to retain important aspects of its Chinese cultural identity. These retentions demonstrate that the vision of the integrationists in the assimilation-versus-integration debate of the 1950s and early 1960s proved in many ways a more accurate prediction of the ways in which Chinese in Indonesia would negotiate their identity vis-à-vis the Indonesian nation.

This case study points to nuances and complexities in relations between the nation-state and ethnic Chinese that can only be discovered through careful consideration of context. It also shows that the study of Chinese in Indonesia is not just the study of ethnicity, but also of Indonesian identity and history. We must read the history of this school in light of the developments in today’s Indonesia, where — occasional set-backs notwithstanding — a nation tolerant and accepting of various cultural and religious streams has emerged.

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NOTES
1. This course aimed to educate the children in Malay/Bahasa Indonesia, Mandarin and mathematics.
2. Willmott writes that the Japanese occupation of Indonesia and the
Indonesian revolution gave rise to strained relationships between indigenous Indonesians and Chinese, and that Chinese communities in various parts of Java suffered acts of violence such as looting, the burning of houses and even physical attacks leading to injury or death. He writes that “in Semarang itself there were no serious incidents, but Chinese refugees poured into the city with tales of atrocities and economic ruin”. See Willmott, *The Chinese of Semarang*, p. 95. It is possible that these Chinese fled to Semarang because of the relatively larger Chinese population from whom they could receive support, and because there was no such violence in the city.

3. There are pictures of these groups in the school’s tenth anniversary publication (KKH 1960).
4. Interview with Tanjung Pahala, 30 October 2010.
5. Interview with Agustin Indrawati Dharmawan, Principal of SD Kuncup Melati, 18 October 2010.
6. The meaning of the original symbol was attributed to a Han dynasty classical philosophy text and Confucius’s *Analects*. No explanation was offered for the change in symbol in 1960, and it was only in 1982, after the revised symbol had been used for more than twenty years, that a page explaining the logo’s meaning was printed. However, nothing was said of where that meaning came from.
7. Interview with Eko Wardojo, 30 November 2010.
8. Interview with Tanjung Pahala, 30 October 2010.
9. Interview with Tanjung Pahala, 30 October 2010.
10. The altar and statue still stand in a room in the school once known as a Hall of Worship (礼堂) but which has been renamed to mean Morality Room (ruang budi pekerti). It is usually used by the school for extracurricular activities such as computer lessons, and over the weekends elderly Chinese men and women gather in that room for regular karaoke sessions.
11. Interview with Eko Wardojo, 18 October 2010.
12. Abalahin’s chapter on Confucianism provides a definition of an “agama” in official state discourse, which indicates a religious system that is characterized by (1) constituting a way of life for adherents, (2) belief in the existence of One Supreme God and (3) the presence of a holy book and a prophet. Other religious systems not recognized by the government are deemed as “belief” (kepercayaan). See Andrew Abalahin, “A Sixth Religion? Confucianism and the Negotiation of Indonesian-Chinese Identity under the Pancasila State”, p. 121.
13. Interview with Kasyanto, 3 December 2010.
15. Interview with Kasyanto, 3 December 2010.
17. The word “disembunyikan” (hidden) was used by Pak Eko, the current secretary of the KKH, to describe what happened to the Confucian lessons (Interview with Eko Wardojo, 30 November 2010).


19. The school had seen several changes in name over the years. From the Khusus Pemberantasan Buta Huruf (Course to eradicate illiteracy) in 1950 that was only supposed to last for six months, it became Taman Pendidikan Anak-anak Khong Kauw Hwee Semarang (Kindergarten KKH Semarang) in 1952, as the school offered two years of kindergarten education and four years of elementary education. In 1979 it became an elementary school that followed the national curriculum and taught children up to grade six, but it did not change its name at that time. In 1992, at the opening ceremony of the school’s new building, the mayor of Semarang suggested that the school adopt a more Indonesian name — *Kuncup Melati* (Jasmine Buds). After some consideration, the suggestion was adopted as final.

REFERENCES


*Peringetan Tjising Khong Tjoe 2500* [Remembering the greatest sage Confucius 2500 (years)]. Semarang: Khong Kauw Hwee, 1949.


