



TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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**The Case of a Transnational
Singing Contest**

Chang-Yau Hoon and
Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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China's Cultural Diplomacy in Indonesia: The Case of a Transnational Singing Contest

By Chang-Yau Hoon and Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The emphasis on cultural connectivity in China's growing presence and involvement in Southeast Asia highlights the importance China places on people-to-people exchanges as part of its global engagement strategy.
- The remarkable ascension of China over the recent decades has precipitated a proliferation of anti-China sentiments, particularly galvanized within the crucible of a "discourse war" with Western powers, as expressed in the latter's "China threat" narrative.
- In response to such challenges, China has made substantial investments in cultural diplomacy, to augment its soft power through orchestrated global outreach initiatives.
- This article examines Chinese cultural diplomacy in the realm of entertainment, specifically "The Melody of Spring: Transnational Spring Festival Gala" hosted in Nanning, Guangxi, and disseminated globally each Chinese New Year.
- Against the legacy of China-Indonesia bilateral relations as well as Indonesia's treatment of its Chinese minority, this study explores China's cultural diplomacy and soft power in contemporary Indonesia.
- Through the case study of the "Transnational Spring Festival Gala", this article posits that China's cultural dissemination as an instrument of soft power has yielded little influence on the Indonesian public and has limited impact on the formation of a transnational imagined community.

China's Cultural Diplomacy in Indonesia: The Case of a Transnational Singing Contest

By Chang-Yau Hoon and Ardhitya Eduard Yeremia¹

INTRODUCTION

The cultural impact of China's growing presence and involvement in the region has generated significant discussion. Beijing's official narratives, particularly in the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have consistently emphasized not only physical connectivity but also cultural exchanges through people-to-people interactions (Kuah 2019). This highlights the importance China places on the deepening of cultural ties as part of its global engagement strategy. This is further demonstrated in China's recent launch of the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), which purportedly features an alternative to Western modernization (Hoon and Chan 2023).

President Xi Jinping's vision of creating a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" is designed to closely intertwine with China's soft power approach, wherein cultural exchanges with partner nations and people-to-people connections play a pivotal role. The emphasis on human and cultural exchanges also extends to the discourse presented by both the Indonesian and Chinese governments when managing their

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bilateral relations. The overarching strategy is encapsulated in the phrase proposed by Xi Jinping to “tell China’s story well” (讲好中国故事).

However, the remarkable ascension of China in recent decades has also engendered a proliferation of anti-China sentiments, particularly galvanized within the crucible of the “discourse war” with Western powers (Shambaugh 2015). This frequently finds expression under the aegis of the “China threat” narrative (Pradt 2016). In response to this conundrum, China has invested substantially in cultural diplomacy and sought to augment its soft power through orchestrated global outreach initiatives (Chen, Colapindo, and Luo 2012).

Operating as an instrument of international relations, soft power conveys a modality of influence characterized by subtlety and allure, in contradistinction to coercion (Nye 1990). In tandem with material assistance and the China model of development paradigms, China’s soft power strategy encompasses multifaceted endeavours. These include the establishment of the much-debated Confucius Institutes (CI) across the globe, the endowment of international academic exchange programmes, the instigation of international outreach endeavours and the expansion of its premier state television broadcaster, CCTV, across diverse linguistic contexts worldwide (Rawnsley 2012).

Concurrently, China’s cultural diplomacy initiatives extend into the realm of entertainment as well. In the past two decades, the Chinese state has authorized the creation of patriotic and nationalistic television series, singing competitions and variety shows that coalesce artists from the broader cultural tapestry of China, spanning Taiwan, Hong Kong and the global Chinese diaspora. The general intent of this soft power deployment is to kindle embers of Chinese nationalism by invoking a wistful sentimentality vis-à-vis an ostensibly “5,000-year-old” civilization, and by fostering a sense of cultural affinity (Chan and Hoon 2021, p. 17). Irrespective of their origins and differences, China’s soft power mechanisms have disseminated popular manifestations of Chinese culture across diverse global Chinese communities (Lin and Um 2017).

Similarly, the global ascendancy of the Chinese language and culture, otherwise known as “Mandarin Fever” (Hoon and Kuntjara 2019), represents another part of China’s proactive public diplomacy.

The escalating influx of Chinese foreign direct investments (FDI) into Indonesia over the past decade has led to a marked surge in the number of individuals studying Mandarin, paralleled by an increase in public manifestations of Chinese cultural identity. Among the myriad expressions of these is a Chinese singing competition—the “Indonesia Spring Festival Melody Contest”. This local iteration finds its antecedent in “The Melody of Spring: Transnational Spring Festival Gala” (春天的旋律: 跨国春节晚会) hosted in Nanning, Guangxi, and disseminated globally each Chinese New Year. Orchestrated through the collaborative efforts of nine prominent Chinese Indonesian associations, the Indonesia Spring Festival Melody Contest throw up winners who then find themselves performing at the larger event, at Nanning’s Transnational Spring Festival Melody.

Against the legacy of China-Indonesia bilateral relations as well as Indonesia’s historical treatment of its Chinese minority, this study explores China’s promotion of soft power in contemporary Indonesia through cultural diplomacy. The case study of the “Spring Festival Melody” demonstrates China’s attempt to construct a transnational imagined community through the conduit of the music festival in China. We simultaneously delve into the nuanced terrain of cultural and identity politics inherent in the organization of the music contest within Indonesia. Adopting a critical lens, the article dissects the manifold channels through which this cultural promotion has permeated different sections of the Indonesian populace—both within the Chinese community and among those of non-Chinese descent. Notwithstanding the enthusiastic receptions encountered, this article posits that the role of Chinese cultural dissemination as an instrument of soft power has yielded little impact on the Indonesian public and the formation of a transnational imagined community.

NAVIGATING COMPLEX CHINA-INDONESIA TIES

As the most populous nation in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has navigated a tumultuous trajectory in its interactions with China and with its Chinese minority populace. Among ASEAN nations, Indonesia was

one of the first to establish diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China; this was in 1950. It enjoyed a period of close rapport with China during the administration of President Sukarno. This endured for less than two decades and ended when President Suharto suspended the bilateral relations in 1967. This decision was emblematic of the dominant sentiment within Indonesia's governance, particularly throughout the thirty-two years of Suharto's New Order regime (1966–98) when the Indonesian government harboured a markedly adverse stance towards China, attributing Beijing with complicity in the abortive communist insurrection of 30 September 1965 (Zhou 2019). That "communist" insurgency had served as a catalyst for an extensive military offensive against the Indonesian Communist Party and the ethnic Chinese, ushering in a period of pronounced anti-communist and anti-Chinese sentiments that reverberated throughout the nation (Williams 1991, p. 149).

The normalization of Indonesia-China relations in 1990 marked a significant turning point, yet it was only with the subsequent ousting of President Suharto in 1998 that bilateral relations improved. Although the post-Suharto era—characterized by democratization and *Reformasi* processes—provided a milieu of cultural liberalization for Chinese Indonesians, the undercurrents of anti-Chinese sentiments continued and could easily turn to violence during periods of political turbulence. Furthermore, apprehensions associated with the "China threat" construct persisted even after Suharto's removal from power. Scholars posit that the discourse of anti-communism retains its potency as an instrument for political mobilization, particularly in orchestrating a shared-adversary narrative, especially during electoral campaigns. Notwithstanding, they argue that the resonance of such a threat has decreased among the younger generation (Rohman et al. 2020, p. 46).

The post-Suharto period of engagement with China was initiated during President Abdurrahman Wahid's term from 1999 to 2001. Wahid's administration reinstated several citizenship rights for the ethnic Chinese and adopted a "look to Asia" policy, marking a pivotal shift in Indonesia's foreign policy (Weatherbee 2017). This momentum continued under President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who leveraged her status as Sukarno's daughter to further strengthen ties with China. The foundations laid by Wahid and Megawati culminated in the landmark

“Indonesia-China Strategic Partnership” declaration in 2005, during President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s tenure. Subsequently, in 2013, this partnership evolved into a “comprehensive strategic partnership”, leading to the expansion of trade, investment, and soft credit avenues.

The present era, under President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), represents another phase of substantial enhancement in the China-Indonesia relationship. Ties between the two nations have deepened across various domains, such as the political, the economic and the military. This progression, as Tjhin (2012) argues, signifies Indonesia’s perception of China as a diminishing ideological threat. Playing an important role as Indonesia’s largest trading partner, China’s BRI and its FDI ventures in Indonesia are intricately linked to President Jokowi’s ambitious vision of positioning the nation as a global maritime hub. This economic collaboration between Indonesia and China has experienced remarkable growth, with notable Chinese-driven infrastructure projects like the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail and China’s proposed involvement in constructing smart city technology for Indonesia’s future capital in Kalimantan, all falling under the BRI umbrella.

SENTIMENTS TOWARDS CHINA AND ETHNIC CHINESE

Despite the substantial strides made in the Indonesia-China relationship, there remains a division in the way Indonesians perceive China. Within Indonesian elite circles, prominent concerns revolve around Indonesia’s increasing dependence on Chinese loans, the influx of Chinese labour, and security apprehensions linked to the South China Sea (Herlijanto 2017). In-depth research done by Yeremia (2020) into the perceptions of fifty Indonesian diplomats regarding the BRI revealed a rather nuanced outlook, however. Negative perceptions about China did not hinder their recognition of BRI’s positive aspects, and respondents expressed a degree of favourability towards the initiative. This complexity suggests the need for Indonesia to adopt a cautious approach towards the BRI (Yeremia 2020, p. 44). On another front, distrust of China remains an issue among the Indonesian grassroots. According to the *State of Southeast Asia 2023* survey conducted by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 57.8 per cent of

Indonesian participants express distrust in China. A majority of these hold the view that China's economic and military might jeopardize Indonesia's interests and sovereignty (Seah et al. 2023, pp. 44–45). Following this, it is evident that more work needs to be done in China's public diplomacy to improve the perception of China among Indonesians.

The deepening economic ties between President Jokowi's administration and China have also fuelled conspiracy theories, insinuating that Jokowi is serving China's interests at the expense of Indonesia's welfare (Rakhmat and Aryanshah 2020). Recognizing the undercurrents of nationalism and Islamism exploiting China's growing economic presence to undermine Jokowi's legitimacy, the administration's China policy seeks an equilibrium between economic development facilitated by China and the display of nationalism and religious sentiments (Yeremia 2021). The prevailing lack of trust among Indonesians towards China underscores that China's soft power and cultural diplomacy are yet to foster people-to-people understanding in Indonesia.

Scholars contend that the relationship between Indonesia and China has become intricately intertwined with Indonesian domestic politics, particularly concerning its ethnic Chinese minority (Anwar 2019; Hiebert 2020, p. 437). This entanglement is characterized by the fusion of anti-China sentiments with Indonesian perceptions of Indonesians of Chinese descent. Despite constituting only 1.2 per cent of Indonesia's population of approximately 270 million, the Chinese minority is persistently viewed as perpetual outsiders (Sai and Hoon 2013). During periods of national turmoil, such as the 1965 abortive coup and the 1998 Asian financial crisis, the ethnic Chinese had consistently been singled out as scapegoats.

Both the *Indonesia National Survey Project* reports of 2017 (Fossati, Hui, and Negara 2017, pp. 24–26) and 2022 (Muhtadi, Hui, and Negara 2023, pp. 46–48) reveal a concerning resurgence of anti-Chinese sentiments within Indonesia. The surveys underscore the persistence of long-standing stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians being exclusive and affluent, casting doubts on their loyalty to the nation. Notably, the surveys highlight various biases against the role of Chinese Indonesians in national politics and the economy. As Setijadi (2017, p. 11) points out,

“[t]he results of the survey are alarming because they show that, despite the reforms of the past two decades, old stereotypes of ethnic Chinese still persist and are perhaps stronger than before”. In a more recent study, Kuntjara and Hoon (2020) noted that although the articulation of deep-seated stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians is now less simplistic, they are still present today.

In 2020, another wave of anti-Chinese sentiment was observed in Indonesia, purportedly linked to reports of China’s treatment of its Uighur minority. Furthermore, a study conducted by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict in Jakarta reported a surge in anti-Chinese rhetoric on social media within Indonesia, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This increase has been utilized by Islamist groups to target individuals of Chinese descent or Chinese expatriates residing in the country (Rakhmat and Aryanshah 2020). However, these pretexts merely mask the deeper causes of renewed hostility towards the Chinese community, which are more accurately tied to the intersection of the Islamic “conservative turn” (van Bruinessen 2013), religious nationalism, and the perpetual issue of economic inequality. These intricate dynamics highlight the imperative for Chinese public diplomacy in Indonesia to acknowledge the complex history of Indonesia, encompassing both international relations with China and challenges to its ethnic Chinese community. Additionally, it must take into account the current multifaceted social, economic and political dynamics involving religion, geopolitics and economic competition.

CHINA’S SOFT POWER IN POST-SUHARTO INDONESIA: THE CASE OF THE TRANSNATIONAL SPRING FESTIVAL GALA

The downfall of Suharto in 1998 marked the end of the authoritarian New Order and the dawn of a democratic period termed *Reformasi* in Indonesia. This era is distinguished by significant legal overhauls, encompassing the repeal of discriminatory citizenship laws and the easing of restrictions on religious and cultural expressions pertaining

to the ethnic Chinese community. It also witnessed a reinvigoration of new Chinese organizations and the revival of previously covert Chinese associations (Hoon 2008). Concurrent with China's ascent, Chinese culture and heritage have evolved into a celebrated ethnic commodity within Indonesia (Sai and Hoon 2013). This transformation is vividly illustrated by the "Mandarin Fever" phenomenon, characterized by an unprecedented proliferation of Chinese language learning across Indonesia (Hoon and Kuntjara 2019).

China's proactive efforts to promote its cultural heritage and linguistic identity materialized through the establishment of the Office of the Chinese Language Council International, commonly known as *Hanban* (汉办), in 1987. This strategic move laid the foundation for the proliferation of Confucius Institutes (CIs) worldwide. In response to the controversies surrounding CIs in Western countries, *Hanban* underwent a name change in 2020, rebranding itself as the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation. At present, a network of more than forty CIs spans ASEAN countries. Chheang (2021) suggests that, unlike waning interest in CIs observed in Western nations due to concerns regarding external influence, censorship, and potential curtailment of academic freedoms, these institutes have gained a more robust presence in Southeast Asia. Since 2007, Indonesia has established seven CIs to promote Chinese language proficiency and cultural awareness among both Indonesians and ethnic Chinese individuals who have experienced a lapse in language and cultural familiarity.

The phenomenon of "Mandarin Fever" in Indonesia is intricately intertwined with the ascension of China, and its interpretation must consider the context of China's economic rise. There has also been a surge in public display of Chinese culture, and a notable manifestation of this is the "Indonesia Spring Festival Melody Contest", a localized rendition of the transnational "The Melody of Spring: Transnational Spring Festival Gala" (henceforth, "the Gala"). This Gala essentially serves as a provincial counterpart to the national Spring Festival Gala Evening (*chunjie lianhuan wanhui*, popularly known as *chunwan*, 春晚), a televised evening extravaganza that ushers in the Chinese New Year. Organized by four agencies in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, including the Information Office of the People's Government,

the Department of Culture and Tourism, the Radio and Television Bureau, and the Propaganda Department of Nanning Municipal Party Committee, this production is managed by a television station in Nanning, the provincial capital, and has been aired since 2007. The Gala event illustrates how Chinese subnational actors are actively engaging on the international stage in support of China's cultural diplomacy. This phenomenon is particularly noteworthy in the context of the more privatized Chinese media market that emerged in the post-Reform era (Rawnsley and Rawnsley 2015; Ptáčková, Klimeš, and Rawnsley 2021).

Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival, holds a paramount position in Chinese culture, standing as the most significant festival for the Chinese worldwide. Comparable in cultural prominence to Christmas in Western societies, this festival marks a major celebratory juncture in China and among its diaspora. Centred on the profound ideals of family reunion, communal gathering, and venerating ancestors, the festival reflects the bedrock of China's blood-ties-rooted societal structure (Gao 2012). In this context, Chinese New Year emerges as an opportune occasion to advance national interests (Zhang 2004), leveraging the cultural emblems and principles interwoven into its fabric. This potency proves particularly pertinent for the Communist Party of China (CPC), fixated as it is on cementing national solidarity. Notably, the CPC has adeptly seized upon the political potential of this cultural festival.

The national *chunwan* orchestrated by China Central Television (CCTV) has entrenched itself as an indispensable facet of Chinese New Year festivities since its inauguration in 1983. Renowned for its dual nature encompassing both cultural and political dimensions, *chunwan* has elicited comprehensive scholarly discourse. Scholars such as Xie (2022, p. 197) and Cui (2009, p. 87) underscore its role as more than a mere outcome of state ideological entreaty or a mere cultural endeavour. Instead, *chunwan* operates as a spectacle meticulously crafted to assert the visibility of party-state power (Shi 2015). Despite the marketization of CCTV, the party's dominion over *Chunwan* remains discernible (Wang 2010), an assertion reinforced by the contention that the programme's humorous content dwindled following Xi Jinping's ascendancy in 2012 (Wang 2022, p. 553). *Chunwan's* political choreography becomes evident

through its construction of primordial identity rooted in the *jus sanguinis* principle, its fabrication of cultural identity via cultural essentialism, its projection of familial nationalism encompassing diverse subjects into a Chinese “super-family”, and its exhibition of confident nationalism showcasing the magnificence of the motherland. This amalgamation inadvertently intermingles the party, the nation and the state.

Within this framework, *chunwan* encompasses global overseas Chinese communities, facilitating a connection between Chinese nationals and their global counterparts, and fostering a link between overseas Chinese communities and the “motherland”. However, the show is not exempt from criticism. Its inherent Han-centric perspective has at times appropriated the cultural heritage of minority groups within China and even ventured into negative cultural appropriation of African traditions (Taylor 2021), thereby posing challenges for both China and the affected countries. While *chunwan*-like programmes offer a medium to promote China’s interests by nurturing a transnational sense of imagined community, their potential failure to exhibit cultural sensitivity and responsibility could inadvertently hinder the advancement of China’s interests as demonstrated by its Guangxi “Melody of Spring” Gala counterpart.

Over the years, the Guangxi Gala television programme has transcended its initial local scope and evolved into an elaborate festival that engages and captivates participants and viewers beyond Nanning and Guangxi Province. It is now broadcasted not only in the adjacent Chinese provinces of Hunan, Guangdong, Hainan, Hong Kong and Macau but also transnationally across numerous Southeast Asian countries, as well as in Australia and New Zealand. This Gala has morphed into a nexus for cross-cultural interactions between Chinese and neighbouring regional cultures. The spectacle encompasses a diverse range of music genres, including traditional and contemporary dances performed by both local and international talents. Notably, performances featuring artists of different nationalities are a standout feature of the Gala. For example, in a particular instance, two Chinese folk music artists shared the stage with an Indonesian and a Vietnamese musician, each playing their respective folk instruments and jointly rendering a Chinese song titled “Cuo Wei Shi Kong” (错位时空). In this way, the Gala positions itself as a conduit

of friendship and a platform for cultural exchange between China and the participating nations.

However, this assertion is not without its problems, for three key reasons. Firstly, the Gala primarily serves as a platform for superficial cultural display and interaction, rather than the fostering of substantial cultural exchanges. Most performing groups typically showcase their own cultural music or dances. A notable exception was a troupe of students from the Faculty of Arts at Guangxi University for Nationalities (广西民族大学), who presented a Malay folk dance from Brunei with noticeable cultural appropriation and inaccuracies in cultural representation. Secondly, given that many of the shows originate from China, Chinese cultural elements have overwhelmingly dominated the Gala's stage. In the 2022 edition, for instance, a Chinese Indonesian artist performed the Indonesian folk song "Ayo Mama", accompanied by Nanning-based Indonesian students donning Chinese traditional attire for their dance. Strikingly, the song was sung in Chinese, with lyrics adapted from a Chinese poem, *Guanju* (关雎), sourced from *Shijing* (诗经), one of the Five Classics of Confucianism (五经). Thirdly, the presentation of foreign cultures has tended to revolve around showcasing the cultural lives of only the ethnic Chinese (*huaren*) in those countries. The Gala has made considerable efforts to establish links between Chinese culture and cultural elements from neighbouring regions, especially that of the *huaren*.

Since 2021, Indonesian involvement in the Gala's production has extended beyond mere musical and dance performances and displays of Indonesian tourist landmarks. They have harnessed the Gala's brand to launch the *Piala Melodi Musim Semi* or Indonesia Spring Festival Melody Contest (春天的旋律杯), a Chinese singing contest held in Indonesia. The organization of the 2022 event was led by the Indonesia Hakka Association (*Perhimpunan Hakka Indonesia Sejahtera*, PHIS), whose leaders enjoy strong links with the business community in mainland China and have cordial relations with the Chinese embassy in Jakarta. This event also involved eleven other Chinese Indonesian associations, among which the Chinese Indonesian Association (*Perhimpunan Indonesia Tionghoa*, INTI), Indonesian Chinese Clan Association (*Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia*, PSMTI),

the Indonesia Guangdong Association (*Perkumpulan Persatuan Guangdong Indonesia*), the Indonesia Fujian Association (*Perhimpunan Fujian Indonesia*), and the Indonesian Chinese Musicians and Singers Consortium (*Konsorsium Musisi dan Penyanyi Tionghoa Indonesia*).

The 2022 edition of the event managed to capture significantly larger and more diverse interest from Chinese Indonesian communities compared to the preceding one. The count of contestants more than doubled, totalling 276 participants hailing from forty-six different cities. In contrast, the previous year's event had garnered contestants from only twenty-three cities. For the 2022 contest, participants were grouped into five categories based on age, ranging from the youngest contestant at six years old to the oldest participant at the age of 91. This age-diverse composition gave rise to the event's tagline: "1 Panggung 5 Generasi" (One Stage, Five Generations). The majority of participants in the singing competition were Chinese Indonesians, demonstrating the little influence this contest had on the Indonesian public in general. For instance, out of a total of twenty-five participants who advanced to the final round in the 2022 contest, only three were non-Chinese Indonesians.

The Indonesian singing contest's affiliation with the Guangxi Gala was at the core of its promotional material. To further consolidate this association, two representatives from Nanning Radio and Television Station participated virtually as judges in both the semi-final and final rounds of the 2022 competition. Additionally, the Chief Director of Radio and Television Nanning attended the finals of both the 2021 and 2022 contests. In his addresses at both events, he lauded his Indonesian counterparts for spearheading this contest and expressed his enthusiasm for replicating the model in other Southeast Asian nations.

The 2022 contest featured an additional element of attraction; winners from each category were given the opportunity to virtually perform at the Gala in Nanning, the capital city of Guangxi. In light of this, the organizing committee positioned the Gala as an emblem of foreign cultural exchanges, not only for Guangxi but also for China at large. Furthermore, the committee also emphasized the substantial international influence of the Gala, particularly within Southeast Asian countries. Consequently, winning this competition held the promise of performing before a wider global audience. Several motivations have underpinned the committee's

decision to host this singing contest in Indonesia. They assert that the contest is designed to showcase exceptional Indonesian talents and the captivating Indonesian culture and music on an international stage. This perspective prompted support from the Indonesian Ministry for Tourism and Creative Economy, particularly evident in the 2021 event. Moreover, the event's organizers positioned the contest as fostering amiable cultural exchanges between Indonesia and China. However, the committee faces constraints in substantiating these claims, as the event fundamentally centres around a Sinocentric approach. Indonesian participants predominantly sang Chinese songs, spanning both traditional and contemporary genres, aligning with the Chinese president's call to "tell China's story well". The intention is for contestants to promote Chinese culture and philosophy through their performances. As illustrated above, even when participants opted for different songs with distinct narratives, the use of the Chinese language still maintained a link to China. Given the prevalence of China-centric narratives in the contest, the contribution this Chinese singing competition gives to cross-cultural exchanges between Indonesia and China remains somewhat uncertain.

The Sinocentric narratives that took centre stage in the 2022 singing contest were notably prevalent even within the children's category, encompassing contestants aged six to fourteen. Four of the five finalists in this category were Chinese Indonesians. A remarkable observation emerged: out of the five finalists, only one, a Chinese Indonesian, diverged from performing renditions that revolved around China or Chinese culture. Remarkably, two of the finalists chose to sing the same song, titled "我爱你中国" (*Wo Ai Ni Zhongguo*, I Love You, China). The song resonates with emotional and affectionate sentiments towards China, celebrating its picturesque natural landscapes, rich culture, and inherent values. Furthermore, the song conveys a deep sense of devotion to China, casting it as both one's "母亲" (*muqin*, mother) and "祖国" (*zuguo*, homeland). Within the lyrics, this sentiment is further amplified, as individuals express their willingness to "dedicate their glorious youth to serving [China]" (把美好的青春献给[中国], *ba meihao de qingchun xian gei [Zhongguo]*). This sentiment aligns seamlessly with Xi Jinping's domestic propaganda endeavours centred on the "China Dream", which meticulously glorifies Chinese history and traditional culture, effectively

mobilizing Chinese nationalism as a legitimization strategy for the Chinese Communist Party (Chan and Hoon 2021).

Furthermore, Chinese cultural motifs overwhelmingly pervaded the performance of the finalists. The participants presented a song centred on the significance of being together with family for the annual reunion during the Chinese New Year festivities. A visual depiction illustrating how an ethnic Chinese family in Jakarta commemorated the passage of the year accompanied the rendition of the song. The video portrayal highlighted essential customs observed during the Chinese New Year celebration, including the traditional family reunion dinner on New Year's Eve (年夜饭, *nian ye fan*), the customary donning of red attire during the festival, and the distribution of 红包 (*hong bao*, red envelopes with monetary gift). While this representation, to some extent, offers an insight into how Chinese Indonesians uphold and respect ancestral traditions, showcasing a robust cultural bond with other diasporic Chinese, it concurrently romanticizes Chinese New Year festivities by excluding other unique local dimensions of the celebration in Indonesia (as discussed in Hoon 2009). Notably, the Chinese New Year observance in numerous Indonesian cities has recently evolved into a more multicultural affair, encompassing the active participation of various ethnic groups. The omission of this process of localization during the Chinese New Year celebration renders the Gala's depiction decidedly reductionist and overtly Sinocentric in nature. Despite its intention, it is doubtful that such representations will contribute to the formation of a transnational imagined community among the Chinese in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This paper has delved into the cultural dimensions of the Indonesia-China relationship. Amid the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative shaping an economic entwining between the two nations, scholarly attention has predominantly focused on the economic facets of their collaboration, often side-lining the socio-cultural factors intrinsic to Indonesia's engagement with China. Furthermore, using an Indonesian perspective, this paper highlights the active role of Indonesian stakeholders in their interactions with their Chinese counterparts. This departure is pivotal as

many existing analyses downplay the partnering nation's agency, often presuming it to be insufficient to navigate interactions with China.

Additionally, this research has underscored the proactive engagement of subnational actors within China in international affairs. While numerous studies have dissected China's strategy for promoting soft power, they frequently do so under the assumption of a centralized decision-making process revolving around Beijing. This paper, in contrast, seeks to illuminate the intricate tapestry of China's soft power endeavours, unveiling the involvement of various actors within the nation and highlighting that it is not exclusively crafted by the central leadership. This is illustrated by the case of the Transnational Spring Festival Gala, which is orchestrated by provincial-level entities rather than emanating solely from the top echelons of authority.

Finally, this study has illuminated that, functioning as a soft power, the Chinese singing contest holds a relatively confined influence on the Indonesian public. Despite its growing popularity, the event's promotion and coverage are predominantly confined to Chinese-language media, thus predominantly capturing the attention of the Chinese Indonesian community. Moreover, it can be reasonably assumed that the event fails to resonate within the Peranakan Chinese Indonesian community, which is largely assimilated and non-Chinese speaking. The inherently Sinocentric nature of this cultural affair does not guarantee its resonance within a community whose members often lack an inherent affinity or interest in China, aside from practical economic considerations.

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that hosting such a culturally exclusive event within a non-Chinese majority country carries inherent political risks, particularly concerning the utilization of songs that overtly express allegiance to China as the "motherland". Such overt expressions might not only impede the soft power aspiration of fostering a favourable international perception of China but could also diminish the event's potential as a vehicle for China to engage with broader segments of Indonesian society.

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