

The Reinvention of Chinese New Year:

Imlek in Post-Suharto Indonesia

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The political events of May 1998 that forced President Suharto to step down brought to the fore the highly problematic position of the ethnic Chinese in relation to the Indonesian nation. One consequence of the riots was what has been commonly described by scholars and the popular media as the “revival” of Chinese identity, as reflected in the lavish celebration of Chinese New Year (Imlek). President Abburahman Wahid abolished Suharto’s assimilation policy and gave the ethnic Chinese unprecedented freedom to assert their cultural and religious identity. For the first time in over three decades, ethnic Chinese could finally celebrate Imlek publicly without any restrictions.

Using Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented tradition” this paper interrogates and problematizes the taken-for-granted notion of cultural “revival”. It specifically focuses on the politics of the re-emergent Chinese New Year celebration. It critically examines how the festival has been reinvented and represented in the contexts of culture, religion and ethnic identity, and explores the effects of modernity and globalization on such constructions.