



020226 Chinese New Year in Indonesia

Hello all,

The following is an email that my friend Charity in Indonesia wrote to me in response to my last email about China. Charity and I went to Washington University together and we both attended the Catholic Student Center there. Actually, we also both went on the trip to Calcutta in 97 that was through the CSC. Charity is currently living in Jakarta where her family lives and is working for Arthur Anderson. She writes:

Speaking of Chinese new year....

It was a big celebration here... this is the first Chinese new year that the government announced as a national holiday. For almost 40 years, Chinese new year was not allowed to be celebrated openly (publicly). So previously, on this holiday Chinese Indonesians went to the temples and then had gathering only with their families. But this year, malls were covered with red and gold decorations, greeting card and parcel sales roared and dragon dance performances happened on the streets. Pretty cool.

I guess I should tell you a bit about why the celebration was banned before. In the sixties during the period of the 1st president (Sukarno), there was a big communist movement in Indonesia. This movement received a lot of resentment from the Indonesians, who strongly associated communism with atheism. Sukarno, on the other hand, thought that communism was not all bad. He believed that there were some aspects of communism that the country could benefit from. Suharto, the 2nd president (Sukarno =1st, SuHarTo=2nd... I know... this name thing is so confusing.... javanese parents aren't too creative when it comes to naming their children) who then was somewhat influential in the army, took advantage of the situation when the people saw Sukarno's support to communism as a flaw. Suharto collected his forces to fight communism, overthrew Sukarno and then "made" himself President. The government under Suharto's leadership then banned communism and anything associated with it... including china and everything Chinese. Because of this my grandpa, who was Chinese, decided that his children should have their birth certificates "rewritten" with Indonesian names (other than that my grandpa's favorite read, the Kho Ping Ho series... written in Chinese characters, had to be smuggled in and he had to pay a lot of money to get them).

Gosh.. I am starting to write a novel here, Jeff!

So anyway... everything Chinese is banned, no new year celebration... until Suharto's rule is over. A year ago, when Abdurrahman Wahid was president he "announced" that the restriction is no longer applicable. Now, even though he is no longer in office, Chinese new year can be celebrated.

I am no politic or history expert.... Indonesian history itself currently is being reviewed (lots of discrepancies when there was no freedom of press during Suharto's time). I am

still slowly learning and trying to find out which part of my junior high history text book is still valid and which part is a total lie.. some parts are still a mystery to me and to the other 240 million Indonesians.

So... Jeff.. that's a little bit of what I can share with you about Chinese new year in Indonesia. Feel free to distribute if you want to. Now I have to go... I was so into what I was writing that I didn't realize the office is almost empty.

Take care!
Charity



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