

# Introduction

The impressions described in the snapshot reflect pivotal stimuli for focusing my empirical research on Chinese Indonesians. The colourful, almost cheerful and widespread display of ‘Chineseness’<sup>3</sup> in various public spaces within the Indonesian context took me by surprise. It heavily contrasted with the image that I had in mind of Chinese Indonesians as an ‘ethnic minority’ that had been tremendously repressed and discriminated against over a long period of time. This image was mainly gleaned from reading about Chinese Indonesians (e.g. amongst others Chua-Franz 2002; Suryadinata 2007, 2008a; Heryanto 1998) as well as based on a generally prevailing outlook in international and academic discourse. The blatant contrast between my observations and my state of knowledge incited my research interest in diverging ways of dealing with the past. Additionally inspired by previous studies in the field of references to the past and most importantly through my role in the “Historische Lebenswelten in populären Wissenskulturen der Gegenwart” (DFG-FOR 875), I decided to focus my PhD project on the intersections of ‘the popular’ and ‘the past’.<sup>4</sup> Since I ‘knew’ that ‘the history’ of ‘the’ Chinese Indonesians had been a tormented one, I assumed that the apparently ‘popular’ celebrations linked to the Chinese Lunar New Year, *Imlek*, represented an interesting point of departure for researching the field of tension around these central notions. However, even at the beginning of my research I realised that my knowledge was deficient or at least biased and that I had to rework my initial suppositions at various levels.

<sup>3</sup> In the context of my empirical observations and data ‘Chinese’ and ‘Chineseness’ (used with single inverted commas) refer to a rather stereotypical image of what I consider, in the Indonesian as well as the German context, to be commonly considered Chinese. Of course, these designations are not linked to any claim to ‘authenticity’ or ‘representativeness’ and they further do not differentiate between ‘Chinese’ and ‘Chinese Indonesian’ since these differences were not always perceptible.

<sup>4</sup> The title of the research group could be translated as “History in Popular Cultures of Knowledge”; for further information see: <https://portal.uni-freiburg.de/historische-lebenswelten/>.

A first insight consisted of the realisation that what to me seemed an obvious relationship between ‘the popular’ and ‘the past’ did not necessarily represent an empirical reality within the realm of the *Imlek* celebrations, since few of my interlocutors in the initial phase of my research established this connection. A second insight partially aligns with this revealing observation. In a similar vein, the ostentatious display of putative ‘ethnic’ markers within the context of *Imlek* was initially linked neither to what I viewed as ‘ethnically’ related, devastating historical occurrences, nor to criticism *per se*. Thus even though I had been convinced that there was a certain kind of linkage between past/history, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘the popular’, I realised that my suppositions had to undergo thorough empirical scrutiny and might even be overturned altogether.<sup>5</sup>

But it was not only on an empirical level that my presumptions were challenged. My extensive literature review revealed that it was difficult to discern a theoretical or epistemological anthropological approach that enables the conceptual combination of the broad notions of ‘past/history’ and ‘the popular’, and even more difficult to find an approach that would simultaneously aim at transcending or softening disciplinary boundaries. This does not mean that there are no approaches that address either of these issues. On the contrary, interest in past/history seems to be part of nearly every anthropological endeavour. More specifically, the works by Hirsch and Stewart (*Ethnographies of Historicity*, 2005), Stewart (*Historicity and Anthropology*, 2016) and Palmié and Stewart (*For an Anthropology of History*, 2016) reveal that there is a long-standing interest in past/history from an anthropological perspective. Accordingly, ‘the popular’, or at least those parts of its denotative field that refer to ‘everyday life’ or ‘concrete lifeworlds’, can be considered to

<sup>5</sup> With regard to the three different notions mentioned together for the first time in this sentence, it has to be stated that they will continue to be used in this way. Since ‘ethnicity’ and ‘the popular’ will throughout my work remain rather ambiguous terms and due to the lack of better options, they are continuously used with single inverted commas. Only when their meaning is specified by concrete contextualisations will I abstain from using the single inverted commas. The term ‘past/history’ (interchangeably used with ‘history/past’) might appear a little circuitous, but it represents an intended deconstruction of a putative dichotomy between these two terms, which I will elaborate on in a later chapter. Due to this implied deconstruction, I will use them without single inverted commas, except when I want to refer to the terms *per se* or when I want to distance myself from specific connotations of either of the terms.

be an integral part of anthropology *a priori*. Moreover, every ‘Anthropology of’ seems to lie at the crossroads of anthropology and another disciplinary field. However, on closer inspection it became clear that there was no fully elaborate approach that would combine all three aspects. The works by Hirsch and Stewart (2005), Stewart (2016) and Palmié and Stewart (2016) represent valuable starting points but are mainly introductory pieces or short theoretical essays and additionally tend to focus on demarcating the anthropological endeavour from that of the historical sciences.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, none of the approaches explicitly address the notion of ‘the popular’, especially in the sense in that it seems to prevail in my empirical field.

Departing from these empirical, theoretical, epistemological and conceptual challenges, my PhD project aims on the one hand to conceptualise a reassessed approach to past/history from an anthropological perspective, which I label ‘Anthropology of History’, and on the other hand to apply this refined approach to the specific case of Chinese Indonesian contexts. This is linked to the following concrete research endeavours: First of all, I aim to develop a refined conceptual-epistemological, anthropological, but potentially interdisciplinary approach that shall be able to encompass the notions of ‘past/history’ and ‘the popular’ as well as additional empirically relevant references to past/history without presupposing specific linkages between these diverse notions. Second, and aligning with this endeavour, I seek to show how such an approach can be operationalised on a methodological-analytical level that additionally might offer points of contact for other, specifically historical, disciplines. And third, I am concerned with developing the refined approach based on my empirical data while at the same time applying it to the context of Chinese Indonesians in order to identify the specificities of my empirical setting.

The chapters of this dissertation are arranged according to these research interests. The first three chapters of the theoretical part (chapters 1-3) deal with the continuous refinement of the previously mentioned concerted and encompassing anthropological, but potentially interdisciplinary, approach to dealing with past/history in the widest possible sense, which I label ‘Anthropology of History’.

The first chapter (1) of this theoretical part can be read as a prologue to this superordinate endeavour. It helps to illustrate various piv-

<sup>6</sup> All of these aspects will be elaborated in greater detail in the theoretical part.

otal aspects. During literature research it became more than obvious that a certain intra- and interdisciplinary discontinuity with regard to taking into account existing approaches dealing with the connection between anthropology and history/past seems to be prevailing within anthropology as well as across disciplinary boundaries. To investigate these discontinuities, I chose the Historic Turn as a valuable starting point since it represents a thought-provoking impulse initiating a general turn within the social sciences towards history in a rather wide sense. By presenting selected approaches of anthropology and historical sciences, which can be associated with the Historic Turn, it becomes possible to identify the major difficulties in transferring ideas across disciplinary boundaries. I argue that these insights help to carve out persistent epistemological challenges when dealing with past/history (chapter 1.3).

Since the thought-provoking impulses of the Historic Turn can be considered to have led to the identification of the pivotal epistemological issues of 'older' approaches, I will also take it into account when reassessing more recent approaches lying at the intersection of anthropology and history (chapter 2). The close scrutiny of these different approaches will contribute to the terminological and conceptual refinement of the field of study and will reveal pending tasks. More precisely speaking, it will become clear that they mainly lack a concerted methodological approach and leave the previously carved out epistemological challenges largely unaddressed.

In the subsequent chapter (3) I will focus on more concretely elaborating my concept of an 'Anthropology of History' in accordance with my first research endeavour, namely the refinement of a concerted conceptual-epistemological anthropological approach that is able to encompass multiple notions of 'past/history' without presupposing a specific linkage between these different, possibly diverging, notions. I do not want to claim that this approach or the term are genuinely 'new' or innovative, but it seeks to combine and refine the strengths of previous approaches. Based on the findings of the previous chapters, I will thus elucidate why I opted for the term 'Anthropology of History' (chapter 3.1) and will subsequently clarify conceptual and epistemological prerequisites that I consider pivotal against the backdrop of previous approaches (chapter 3.2). With regard to my second research endeavour, I will then elaborate on how this approach can be operationalised on a methodological-analytical level (chapters 3.3, 3.4).

Evolving from the methodological idea of Historical Communication, specifically in combination with the valuable analytical-reflective concept of Historiotopes, I will delineate an approach that aims to enable the filling of the existing gap in the methodological roadmap (chapter 3.3). I argue that this approach necessarily needs to be combined with pivotal epistemological-methodological insights from the anthropological stance, namely multiplying engagement and estranged juxtaposition, to being able to essentially contribute to addressing the pending epistemological challenges. Since the anthropological stance can, I argue, easily be applied by other disciplines, this concrete and encompassing methodological-analytical approach offers an important connecting point for other, specifically historical, sciences (chapter 3.4).

The last chapter of the theoretical part not only addresses the second pivotal notion of this work besides history/past, namely 'the popular', but at the same time also represents a first application of the previously developed methodological-analytical approach, since 'the popular' is conceived as an analytical category, or Historiotope (chapter 4). Within this chapter I will first of all sketch the broad denotative spectrum of the notion and subsequently define the methodological challenges that are connected to certain aspects of 'the popular', specifically those related to 'mass' (in the sense of concerning many people), when broaching it from an anthropological perspective (chapters 4.1 and 4.2). I will then suggest possible methodological solutions at the level of data collection and evaluation (chapters 4.3 and 4.4).

The chapter "The Historiotope(s) of Historiographic Accounts" (chapter 5) represents another application of the previously developed methodological approach and therefore should not be considered a historical background or state of the art in the 'classical' sense but rather as an analytical-reflective perspective on these issues. In chapters 6 and 7, I will accordingly reflectively specify my concrete research contexts, my focus 'group' and the entailing methodological aspects.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10, namely "The Historiotope of Ethnic-Inspired Popular Events", "The Historiotope of Personal Past Relationships" and "The Historiotope of the Wider Popular Landscape", embody the empirical heart of this work and are based on my extensive fieldwork in Chinese Indonesian contexts in the cities of Yogyakarta and Semarang, both in Central Java, from January to October 2011 and from January to April 2012. As previously stated, they have to be considered as the empirical basis for the hermeneutical development of my

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theoretical-epistemological-methodological approach of a reassessed Anthropology of History. At the same time they represent an illustrative application of this approach. To fully implement the refined approach, and specifically to accommodate the anthropological stance and its epistemological benefits, I will conclude with a juxtaposition of the different Historiotopes to draw some more general conclusions on 'the popular and the past in Chinese Indonesian contexts' as well as on the relevance of the refined Anthropology of History.