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The year of the Ox is coming and the Chinese community across the world, including in Indonesia are gearing up for celebrations to usher it in. Next Monday will be the first day of year 2560 on the Chinese lunar calendar.

The New Year celebration is traditionally accompanied by a common wish for prosperity and luck throughout the year. Even though the world is going through an economic crisis, this year will be no exception.

This is not a contradiction as the Chinese word for crisis is superseded by the word for opportunity. The Chinese believe that opportunity and danger coexist.

This kind of resilience and optimism is needed by the country to withstand the menace of the crisis.

The Chinese in Indonesia understand what resilience means because they endured long and punishing years under the New Order government, when their cultural expression was curbed.

Optimists predict that the global economy will turn around for the better in 2010. If this is true, the economic crisis will be just a dot on a line compared to their three decades as cultural outlaws. The restrictions placed on the Chinese in Indonesia culminated in May 1998 when riots broke out in a number of regions targeting, among other people, Chinese Indonesians.

Despite some lingering forms of discrimination against the Chinese, things have, in general, changed dramatically in the last 11 years. The 2006 law on citizenship recognized Chinese-Indonesians as part of the country's population.

Not only are Chinese-Indonesians now able to celebrate their New Year freely, but the Chinese New Year has become a national holiday. What a change this is from the time when they were not able to celebrate their culture in public.

There is a growing acceptance of Chinese Indonesians in sectors they have often been barred from in the past including the civil service, the military, government and in the entertainment industry.

All this is encouraging. The country will be better off when its potential is synergized; isolating one or more minority groups does not pay.

Changes over the past 10 years are telling. Younger Indonesians, including Chinese-Indonesians, tend to accept their ethnic differences more naturally because they are freer from cultural stigmas that befell their elders.

Young Chinese-Indonesians tend to be more open about their heritage. Like the Bataks, Papuans or Javanese, they do not hesitate to say that they are of Chinese extraction. This is a far cry from the past and a good development, because accepting oneself as one is will pave the way to sound nationhood.

The Chinese presence in Indonesia dates back centuries to when they came to the archipelago along with other ethnic groups including Indians and Arabs.

Seen from a historical perspective, the three-decade ban on Chinese culture during Soeharto's rule is but a brief respite. Chinese culture is enriched by local culture and has yielded an entirely new cultural genre. This is testament to their long presence and is reflected in local furniture, literature and music.

The traditional Gambang Kromong, for example, is an emerging form of music in Jakarta and in its vicinity, which marries Chinese and local musical instruments.

In the past, the Chinese New Year was celebrated by Chinese Indonesians together with many of the country's other ethnic groups. These days will surely return.

On this joyful occasion we would like to convey our best wishes for a happy new year to our Chinese Indonesian compatriots.