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Reimagining Chinese Indonesians in Democratic Indonesia

BY RAY HERVANDI

Indonesia's initiation of democratic reforms in May 1998 did not portend well for Chinese Indonesians. Constituting less than 5 percent of Indonesia's 240 million people and concentrated in urban areas, Chinese Indonesians were, at that point, still reeling from the anti-Chinese riots that had occurred just before Suharto's fall. Scarred by years of discrimination and forced assimilation under Suharto, many Chinese Indonesians were uncertain—once again—about what the “new” Indonesia had in store for them.

Yet, the transition to an open Indonesia has also resulted in greater space to be Chinese Indonesian. Laws and regulations discriminating against Chinese Indonesians have been repealed. Chinese culture has grown visible in Indonesia. Mandarin Chinese, rarely the language of this minority in the past, evolved into a novel emblem of Chinese Indonesians' public identity.

Notwithstanding the considerably expanded tolerance post-Suharto Indonesia has shown Chinese Indonesians, their delicate integration into Indonesian society is a work in progress. Failure to foster full integration would condemn Chinese Indonesians to a continued precarious existence in Indonesia and leave them vulnerable to violence at the next treacherous turning point in Indonesian politics. This undermines Indonesia's ideals that celebrate the ethnic, religious, and cultural pluralism of *all* its citizens.

Moreover, Chinese Indonesians' journey of integration would remain incomplete, unless Indonesians—Chinese Indonesians included—restart a civil conversation that examines how this minority fits in Indonesia's ongoing state- and nation-building project. In the process, this conversation will have to reconsider Chinese Indonesians' locus in the nation.

Once Chinese, Now Indonesian

In the social structure of the Dutch East Indies, sojourners, and later migrants, from China occupied the middleman position that served as a buffer between the few Dutch colonials and the many indigenous peoples of the East Indies. However, political adherence of East Indies Chinese was arrayed along a wide spectrum: from devotion to Chinese nationalism in its Nationalist or Communist variants, to encouraging the preservation of the colonial status quo, to unambiguous support for the Indonesian nationalists.

Indonesia's botched coup of 1965 and the ensuing anti-Communist purges left Indonesian Chinese in an increasingly untenable position. Alleged links between China, Indonesian Communists, and ethnic Chinese communities behind the failed coup emphasized the paranoia that Indonesian Chinese are unchangingly committed to China and thus disloyal to Indonesia. The Suharto-era obsession with the so-called “triangular threats” laid the foundation for anti-Chinese discrimination because, as an Indonesian expression has it, “once Chinese, always Chinese.”

Ray Hervandi, Project Assistant at the East-West Center in Washington, argues that Indonesians need to “restart a civil conversation that examines how [Chinese Indonesians fit] in Indonesia's ongoing state- and nation-building project. In the process, this conversation will have to reconsider Chinese Indonesians' locus in the nation.”



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But a funny thing happened on the way to *Reformasi*. While the ethnic Chinese had always been under the process of acculturation in the East Indies and later Indonesia, Suharto’s policy of forced assimilation—for better or worse—decisively sped up the process that transformed Indonesian Chinese into Chinese Indonesians. Generations of young ethnic Chinese in Indonesia grew up with no real or imagined bonds with China. They spoke Indonesian or the local regional language. They embraced one of the five officially sanctioned religions of Indonesia, most likely Christianity or Buddhism. (Reform-era Indonesia eventually recognized the sixth official religion, Confucianism, in 2000.) From Olympian badminton player Susi Susanti to singer Agnes Monica, they shared in Indonesia’s national life. They came to identify Indonesia as their homeland and themselves as Indonesians.

Reconstructing the Chinese Indonesian’s Image

Indigenous and Chinese Indonesians are not that different. Their dysfunctions are Indonesian, their challenges parallel, and their histories tightly intertwined. Consider, for example, the charge that Chinese Indonesians encourage corruption in Indonesia. In an echo of the old colonial social structure, the Suharto years were infamous for the corrupt Ali-Baba partnership, which describes a nexus between the crooked indigenous official, Ali, and his greedy Chinese businessman, Baba. The ill effects of these inequitable partnerships were, however, rarely blamed on Ali, who brought political cover to the partnership, but always on Baba, who faced the heat.

Or take the accusation that Chinese Indonesians arrogantly refuse to integrate into local society. In fact, palpable animosity and anti-Chinese prejudice are what leads many Chinese Indonesians to keep to themselves. As illustrated in the cases of the Javanese in Aceh, the Madurese in Central Borneo, or the Buginese on Tarakan—all cases of severe social conflict between newly arrived and local indigenous Indonesians—the perils of failed social integration confront all Indonesians.

In addition, Chinese Indonesians are not, and should not be, a substantive issue in Sino-Indonesian relations. This is underlined in China’s muted and belated response to Indonesia’s anti-Chinese riots in 1998, and the relative lack of its mention during Prime Minister Wen Jiabao’s recent visit to Indonesia in April. After all, the existence of ethnic kin across international borders has aroused little suspicion of disloyalty toward, say, Malay Indonesians, despite the long and continuing history of tension between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Most importantly, Chinese Indonesians’ greatest contribution to the Indonesian nation-building project might have lain in their unwitting role as Indonesia’s internal Other. Constructing a common national identity among the many and evidently dissimilar indigenous peoples of Indonesia would have been much more challenging without an Other. Indonesia’s external Other clearly exists beyond the national borders. Chinese Indonesians’ role as an internal Other is, nevertheless, evident in their ascribed standing as the perennially “foreign” group against whom “real” indigenous Indonesians could coalesce and be contrasted.

Starting the Conversation

Indonesia has moved on from the Suharto-era preoccupation with Communism and ethnic Chinese links to Communist China, and Chinese Indonesians continue to converge with the Indonesian mainstream. Furthermore, the issue of economic inequality in Indonesia is evolving from one that carries a stigma for Chinese Indonesians to one that all Indonesians must face, as more and more indigenous Indonesians steadily enter the middle classes. Indigenous and Chinese Indonesians have much more in common than they realize. It is now time to restart the conversation.