

Chinese Indonesians in a rapidly changing nation: Pressures of ethnicity and identity

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Abstract: *Throughout periods of political instability and economic adversity – from Dutch colonial rule, through President Suharto’s period in office, to more recent times – ethnic Chinese in Indonesia have been recurrent scapegoats for violence. Suharto, especially, manipulated local perceptions of the Chinese in the economic and political arenas, to suit the needs of his government. Yet, circumstances have changed since the 1998 riots in Indonesia and Suharto’s departure. Subsequent presidents have introduced legislation aimed at reducing legal restrictions on Chinese Indonesians and they, in turn, are beginning to have greater public voice through a diversity of outlets. These include the growth of numerous new print and television media; a flourishing literature sphere; the rise of a variety of political parties, both ethnicity-based and more wide-ranging; and the development of non-political organisations, some tackling discrimination and others focusing upon Chinese sociocultural needs. These channels are facilitating the appearance of new and re-emerging ethnic Chinese identities, some surfacing from over 30 years of imposed dormancy. This paper is a preliminary investigation of manifestations of these identities among ethnic Chinese in Indonesia’s contemporary public realm.*

Keywords: *Chinese Indonesians, ethnic Chinese, identity, Indonesia, Suharto*

Introduction

Throughout President Suharto’s New Order government from 1967 to 1998, the identities of the Chinese in Indonesia, who currently comprise approximately 7 million (or about 3% of a total population of nearly 250 million), were politically manipulated as Suharto stage-managed local understandings with regards to their roles in the country’s economic and political arenas (Goldner, 2002; Hakim, 2003; World Fact Book, 2006). These portrayals construed the Chinese as collectively monopolising a considerable portion of the country’s wealth (with estimates as high as 70% of total economic activity), making them a convenient scapegoat for the government as needed (Wibowo, 2001). At the same time, the government compelled the homogenisation of Chinese cultural identities, orchestrating the erasure of intra-Chinese ethnic diversity and emphasising in its place a

process of assimilation within a universal Indonesian identity.

While the country was still under President Suharto’s rule, the impacts of the South-East Asian economic crisis began to be felt acutely in Indonesia. Rioting erupted in a number of sites throughout the country towards the end of 1997, partly because of the intensification of poverty experienced by many of the nation’s people as a result of the economic crisis. Tensions were fuelled further by continued resentment both towards the Chinese, because of their perceived wealth, and towards the government. In May 1998 the near total destruction of Jakarta’s Chinatown district marked an explosive breaking point. Confronted not only with the loss of their homes and businesses, the Chinese community was increasingly targeted in ongoing violence. The brutal rapes and murders of a number of ethnic Chinese deeply aggravated the state of turmoil (Siegel, 1998). It was

these riots that, for many Chinese, constituted a defining moment for reconsidering their identity and their place in post-Suharto Indonesia. Concurrently, public acknowledgement of alternative discourses of identity gradually became more possible as New Order state structures and ideologies were disbanded after Suharto's resignation in May 1998. An important component of this 'renegotiation of the self' in Indonesia has been the public resurfacing of the Chinese consciousness, hitherto suppressed for more than 30 years. As such, this paper concentrates on the impacts of the extensive social and political transformations on the perceptions of identity among Chinese Indonesians. It explores how, since Suharto's downfall, these shifting identities are being (re)articulated in the public sphere through involvement in the media, literary and cultural activities, political institutions and civil society.

A highly contested term, earlier understandings of identity were conceptualised primarily with regards to social categories such as class and gender, in which identity was assumed to reflect a core or fixed sense of self (Erickson, 1959; Giddens, 1991). Meanwhile, in more contemporary theorisations, identity is considered to be a reflexive project, emphasising its multiple, fluid and unstable nature (Dunn, 2000; Valentine, 2001). Following such recent approaches, identity can be understood both as 'self-identity', based on a person's conscious self-typification and encompassing concepts such as uniqueness and individuality, and also as sameness, whereby people relate to each other or are distinguished by others on the basis of shared characteristics. The latter include 'evaluative or emotional characteristics from which the individual derives self-esteem, or a sense of knowing or belonging. These features are highly variable in intensity and salience, as are any associated normative expectations which may furnish individuals with guides to their social behaviour' (Byron, 2001: 292; see also Bringa, 1993; Ma and Cartier, 2003). Taking into account these understandings, this paper explores the multiple ways in which Chinese Indonesians, compelled by their own experiences as well as relationships with other neighbouring groups, are socially constructing, (re)negotiating and maintaining their identities. It does so because,

as reported by Gunawan (2003: online), 'one of the biggest problems for the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia is confus[ion] about their identity and how to position themselves in local society'.

Recent processes of identity formation for Chinese Indonesians in Indonesia, induced by both internal and external cues, are increasingly perceptible through a range of activities since the fall of Suharto's regime. These activities include a combination of re-emerging social traditions, such as cultural festivals, celebrations and other types of entertainment, as well as newly emerging social movements, and political activities. New conceptions of what it means to be Chinese Indonesian have surfaced from these activities, and the ways in which these (re)emerging identities are taking shape call for close examination.¹

We begin this paper with a brief review of the history of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, emphasising events during President Suharto's tenure in office which contributed to the Chinese suffering from 'autohypnotised amnesia, a mental condition in which people deliberately eliminate their self-identities' (Dananjaya, cited in Widiadana, 2000: online). We then evaluate events taking place throughout the economic and political crisis of the late 1990s that directly impacted Chinese Indonesians, and go on to analyse an array of reactions to these, both from successive governments and from Chinese Indonesians themselves. Tan (2001) and Wibowo (2001) suggest that the Chinese embraced extremely diverse tactics during this period with which to resist discrimination by the *pribumi*,² namely 'exit', 'voice' and 'loyalty'. Through these mechanisms, many Chinese Indonesians effectively re-articulated their role and place in Indonesian society (Djalal, 2001). Yet, as Tan and Wibowo point out, in academic and media discourses many of these identity transformations have been fundamentally overlooked as a result of undue attention paid to the 'exit' strategy taken up by a segment of the Chinese population in the face of ethnic tensions. This paper, therefore, explicitly examines the other 'lost' strategies, and gives space to the multiplicity of practices this minority population has recently taken up, in part to contend with ongoing discrimination.³

Historical ethnic divisions and silencing

Although the Chinese in Indonesia display tremendous cultural heterogeneity and do not constitute a cohesive group by any means, many *pribumi* nevertheless categorise them collectively as outsiders. This perception is based on their seemingly shared 'non-Indonesian pedigree', with 'common' geographical roots elsewhere and a lack of territorially based Indonesian ancestry (Hill, 1997). This view, as well as a combined wealth that far surpasses their numbers, has made Chinese Indonesians prime targets for 'expressions of and measures for Indonesian economic nationalism' (Suryadinata, 1998: 3). Consequently, the Chinese have a long and tumultuous history in Indonesia dating back to Dutch colonial rule (1596–1942) from which time they have continually been singled out as scapegoats for violence.

It is generally accepted that the Chinese first migrated to Indonesia in the seventeenth century, settling in the Dutch-founded city of Batavia (now Jakarta) in an effort to profit from the many economic opportunities available (Tarling, 2001; *Tempo*, 2004a).⁴ Yet, an important aspect of the history of the Chinese in Indonesia – and one that was '*selama 35 tahun . . . telah diabaikan*' (overlooked for 35 years) – is that, as well as Islam being brought to Indonesia by traders from India and Persia, Chinese Muslim traders were also responsible for the religion's spread (Adam, 2002a: online). Historical evidence suggests in fact that some of the legendary *Wali Songo* ('The Nine Holy Men') – Sunan Ampel, Sunan Dradjad, Sunan Bonang – were Chinese. A 1968 book by Professor Slamet Muljana, *Runtuhnya Kerajaan Hindu-Jawa dan Timbulnya Negara-negara Islam di Nusantara (The Fall of Hindu-Javanese Kingdoms and the Rise of Islamic States in the Archipelago)* was in fact banned for suggesting this (Adam, 2002a).

It was during Dutch rule that the Chinese founded many trade monopolies and came to preside over most of the banking sector. These ventures distinguished the Chinese from the *pribumi* majority, a development supported by the Dutch regime's anti-integrationist policies (Schwartz, 1994). Indeed, as Suryadinata (2001: 503) claims 'the Dutch made no attempt to

integrate the Chinese into indigenous society; on the contrary . . . the colonisers introduced a divide-and-rule policy towards the population.' Consequently, the Javanese aristocracy, especially, became 'deeply hostile' towards the Chinese (Schwartz, 1994: 103). The demand for – and receipt of – protection from the Dutch, coupled with the formation of self-defence groups by a large proportion of Chinese, inflamed this resentment. Such actions fuelled increasing notions that the Chinese stood in opposition to an increasingly popular nationalist movement.⁵

During the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 Chinese political organisations in Indonesia were banned (Suryadinata, 2001). Subsequently, during President Sukarno's administration (1945–1965), the debate regarding assimilation versus integration escalated. Assimilation entailed forsaking Chinese customs and cultural traits, whereas integration involved a 'political loyalty and identification with Indonesia but not an immediate abandonment of group identity' (Mackie and Coppel, 1976: 12). While advocates of integration were increasingly slated as Communists, those in support of assimilation were seen as building upon more dominant nationalist sentiments taking shape in a newly independent Indonesia. Sukarno propagated this assimilation stance, implementing policies intended to limit the economic influence of the Chinese, such as a ban on their trade in rural areas.⁶ Anti-Chinese sentiments frequently escalated into violence, especially in the Javanese cities of Tegal, Cirebon, Bandung and Sukabumi.

From the mid-1960s, the founding of President Suharto's New Order regime and its subsequent consolidation of power fundamentally redefined Chinese–*pribumi* relations (Schwartz, 1994). In the period following a botched coup in September 1965 – which Suharto alleged China had helped provoke – an anti-communist purge ensued, resulting in a widespread massacre. Some estimates place the death toll during this time at a minimum of 500 000 people and, as many Chinese were accused of being Communist sympathisers, a great number of the victims were ultimately Chinese (Djalal, 2001; Tarling, 2001).

A nation-wide series of assimilation policies (referred to by some as *pribumisasi*) that dis-

criminated against the Chinese in various ways was put in place in the late 1960s and 1970s. Such discriminatory measures included the prohibition of Chinese script, effectively leading to the elimination of dozens of Chinese language newspapers, the stifling of Chinese cultural expression, and the eventual closure of Chinese language schools and educational institutions (Heryanto, 1998; Mackie, 1999). Educational opportunities were restricted further with the implementation of a '10 per cent limit on university places for Chinese students imposed for courses in medicine, engineering, law and science' (Djalal, 2001: online). Furthermore, in choosing not to run the risk of being labelled disloyal to the nation, Chinese Indonesians were strongly encouraged to adopt more 'Indonesian-sounding' versions of their names (*Associated Press*, 2001: online). Chinese Chambers of Commerce were outlawed and 'identity cards that all Indonesians must carry contained a code that enabled the holder to be identified as either Chinese or not' (Backman, 1998: online; see also Suryadinata, 1978). In 1972 President Suharto also 'advised' *non-pribumi* businesspeople to allocate 50% of the shares in their companies to *pribumi* Indonesians. Measures like these make it clear that the increasingly visible ethnic tensions since the late 1990s are undoubtedly historically embedded and that they repeatedly reinforce a '*pribumi* versus Chinese' dynamic, in contrast to conveying a tension between a particular cultural group within Indonesia versus Chinese from a specific origin.

Chinese individuals in Indonesia are extremely diverse, not only with regards to their origins and level of assimilation into mainstream Indonesian society, but also in terms of socioeconomic class.⁷ As Paris (1998: 20) insists, 'despite having being favoured by the Dutch, the vast majority of the seven million descendants of these Chinese transplants ... are not wealthy.' Dananjaya (cited in Widiadana, 2000: online) further asserts that 'thousands of residents living on the outskirts of Jakarta like Tangerang, west of Jakarta, Sawangan to the south of Jakarta, and Cilincing in North Jakarta are of Chinese origin and live in poverty.' Yet, the social stratification of Chinese Indonesians by class is most often neglected in media discourse, with references to a few

exceptionally prosperous tycoons being the exception (Turner and Seymour, 2002). The omission of Chinese Indonesian class dynamics is not, however, limited to the media. When *pribumi* anti-Chinese sentiment reaches its threshold, little consideration is given to differences in socioeconomic class among Chinese when they are targeted. As Williams (1998: 20) explains, 'the problem with the Chinese debate is that the wealthy conglomerate owners are very few and are least likely to face the mobs.'

These conglomerates emerged largely in the 1960s and 1970s via the careful manipulation of a complex system of patronage, as the New Order regime sought assistance in managing the economy (Hill, 1996). This network involved close ties among the business elite, Suharto, other political figures and the powerful armed forces (ABRI, *Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia*, until 1999, now TNI, *Tentara Bersenjata Republik Indonesia*). By 1994, of the top 25 conglomerates, *pribumi* interests controlled only four, with Chinese Indonesian businesspeople dominating the remainder and thus consolidating considerable fortunes as a result. This has led some Indonesian commentators to use the term *sapi perahan* ('milk cow') to describe the role of Chinese businesspeople in New Order conglomerates.⁸ University of Indonesia anthropologist James Danandjaja, for example, in a 2002 interview with *Media Indonesia*, described Eddy Tanzil as the *sapi perahan* of Sudomo, and Liem Sioe Liong as the *sapi perahan* of Suharto (*Media Indonesia*, 2002a: online; see also Garuda, 1997; *Tempo*, 2004b).

The 1998 riots

The Indonesian economic and political crisis that erupted in 1997 had a drastic impact on many individuals who saw the cost of their basic necessities, such as rice and cooking oil, increase by more than 20% per month in early 1998, with little idea as to the reasons behind this growing economic burden (Evans, 1999). These price rises, combined with critical food shortages and countless job losses, led to frustration and anger among the general Indonesian population. These emotions, mixed with government resentment, severe poverty and

anti-Chinese sentiment, erupted into riots during the first half of 1998. Tan (2001: 949) points out that the episodic violence plaguing 1998 was in effect a tragic snapshot indicative of the broader context of *pribumi* mistrust and frustration, as 'ethnic riots are symptomatic of the failure of incomplete ethnic domination, especially in the economic and cultural realms'.

Two important features regarding the nature of the riots can be extrapolated from the *Jakarta Post's* coverage of the riots between February and May 1998 (Turner and Seymour, 2002). First, riots that were explicitly anti-Chinese took place during relatively short time periods in February and May. This leads one to question whether the anti-Chinese riots were devised by certain government contingents, a possibility further explored shortly. Second, there were two distinct types of riots or protests involving two essentially different groups. The first of these groups, the *massa* (populist lower classes), protested against rising food prices, focusing on the Chinese as the centre of their angst (Siegel, 1998). It is now common knowledge that, out of self-interest, the government and army tolerated these riots, drawing upon the mounting anti-Chinese feeling in order to divert attention away from their own wrongdoings (Wanandi, 1999; Junaidi, 2006). On the other hand, the second group of protestors was made up of primarily middle-class students with an agenda to bring about major political change and remove Suharto from office. The intentions of the second group contrasted sharply with those of the *massa* who were more focused on rectifying their economic position (Siegel, 1998).

The very fact that this majority middle-class student group did not take aim at the Chinese in their protests highlights the economic disparities that persist in Indonesian society. It was the poorest classes who were hardest hit economically by the crisis, whereas the impact on the middle classes was not as severe. For the greater proportion of the latter, the elevated prices of basic necessities were still within their financial means and therefore they had no compelling reason or 'need' for anti-Chinese sentiment. Additionally, the students' demands for far-reaching *reformasi* (reform) indicate that they had a clearer understanding of the fundamental origins of the crisis, namely the Indonesian gov-

ernment and its corrupt practices. On the other hand, the protests of the *massa* were often class and ethnic-based, rooted in a need to vent anger brought about by misconceptions regarding the causes of their poverty. Such riots were, in effect, a climax of the ever intensifying suspicion and mistrust with which the *pribumi* have looked upon Chinese Indonesians (Wibowo, 2001), and in turn, were yet another manifestation of the history of discrimination against Chinese Indonesians.

Over the course of only two days in mid-May 1998, more than 1000 people were murdered and at least 168 Chinese women were raped. In addition, the Chinese district of Jakarta was ravaged, as 4083 Chinese shops and properties, and 40 shopping centres were ransacked and set afire (Wibowo, 2001). The events of the 13th and 14th of May triggered further economic and political havoc and revealed widening fissures within the government and armed forces. As the real consequences of the riots became apparent, not only did the horrors taking place in Jakarta begin to receive attention in the international media and political spotlight, but importantly, the Suharto Government's incapacity to halt the violence was viewed with increasing reproach (Solomon, 1999).

These Jakarta riots were of an overwhelmingly anti-Chinese tenor, and did not incorporate anti-government sentiments to the same extent as other rioting that same year. Some commentators argue that this was because there was an active anti-Chinese campaign sustained by certain divisions of the military at the time (Wanandi, 1999; Suryadinata, 2001). The military was sharply divided into two blocs, led by army generals Prabowo and Wiranto (Mietzner, 1999). One possibility is that troops faithful to General Prabowo channelled the *massa* towards anti-Chinese rioting in an effort to undercut the power of General Wiranto. Before this, following a public backlash against Chinese businesspeople driven by Suharto, Prabowo had bolstered anti-Chinese sentiment among his Muslim sympathisers. The *Komite Indonesia untuk Solidaritas Dunia Islam* (Indonesian Committee for the Solidarity of the Muslim World), one such Muslim group, had actively disseminated books denouncing the dominance of Chinese Indonesian businesses (Mietzner, 1999). Moreover, these activities

were underway during a period when the government consistently accused Chinese Indonesians of being non-nationalist because of their accumulation of vital capital overseas. This attitude was exemplified by the prominent Indonesian economist Sumitro Djojohadikusumo when he warned against an 'unholy alliance of crony capitalists' involving 'a group of people who felt not rooted in the Indonesian soil' (*Info Harian*, 1998: online).

Many commentators consider May 1998 to be a decisive moment in the history of Chinese Indonesians, beyond the earlier resentment and discrimination directed at them during the Dutch, Japanese, Sukarno and New Order periods. Individual Chinese Indonesians were immediately affected in different ways by the riots, and clearly, the emotional toll on those families and people who suffered from rape and murder is unfathomable to most outsiders. On a broader scale, different sectors of the Chinese Indonesian community also had varying responses to the political and economic crisis. Despite what was reported in popular media reports, not all Chinese individuals and their capital took flight abroad after the initial economic crisis and the riots in May 1998. For those with the financial wherewithal, however, it was a clear first choice. It was this form of response, opted for by more affluent Chinese Indonesians, that was emphasised in media and academic discourses at the outset.⁹ Nevertheless, a range of other less well-documented responses also occurred and it is for this reason that they form the crux of our present discussion. These reactions are both an indication, and a result, of changing identities of Chinese Indonesians, as well as the ways in which their relations with the *pribumi* population are being re-constituted. First, however, let us briefly turn to analyse the governmental reactions to the riots and anti-Chinese sentiment, from Suharto's downfall until May 2006.

Government reactions to the 1998 riots

Since 1998 there has been increasing official and public acknowledgement within Indonesia that the Chinese Indonesian community faced flagrant injustices during the May riots. Much of this acknowledgement has come through the repealing of anti-Chinese laws in effect before

and after Suharto assumed power. Although many of these gestures are symbolic in nature, their impact has nonetheless been significant. Soon after being inaugurated as president, B.J. Habibie embarked upon legal reforms when he released his 1998 Presidential Decree No. 26 that announced the 'cessation of the use of the terms *pribumi* and *non-pribumi* in all government policy formation, program planning and implementation activities' (Hasani, 2002: online).

Then, in January 2000, following a long history of amicable relations between Habibie's successor Abdurrahman Wahid (widely known as 'Gus Dur') and Chinese Indonesians, Wahid's government permitted – for the first time since the late 1960s – the celebration of Chinese New Year on the streets of Indonesia (*South China Morning Post*, 2000; Akmar, 2002). During his time as president, Wahid also repealed laws in place since 1965 forbidding the local reproduction of Chinese characters, thus enabling the publication of Chinese newspapers,¹⁰ and in 2001 he revoked the ban on Chinese Indonesians using their Chinese names. In addition, Wahid moved to reassure Chinese Indonesians that they could openly practise their culture and religious beliefs without fear of reprisal by the State, declaring: 'I would like to renew the Government's commitment to stay out of religious issues. Let every religious believer take care of their own beliefs. As we have all learned, any government intervention would only create negative consequences' (cited in England, 2002: 1; see also Taufiqurrahman, 2006). Moreover, schools that wanted to were authorised to openly teach Mandarin to their students after being prohibited from doing so for many decades. Asvi Warman Adam (2002b), however, points to a significant missed opportunity during the curriculum reform in Indonesia. The new competency-based curriculum lifts the lid on previously silenced issues such as human rights, democratisation and regional autonomy, and covers the contributions of Indian, Arabic and European cultures to Indonesia, but makes no mention of Chinese cultural practices.

Following Wahid, the next president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, 'for the sake of solidarity', moved to encourage new trade agreements with China (Unidjaja, 2002: online). She also agreed

to allow Chinese New Year to be a State holiday from 2003, partially in an attempt to appease China's concerns relating to the treatment of its ethnic population residing in Indonesia (Ruwitch, 2002).¹¹ In April 2004, Megawati declared that Chinese Indonesians were no longer required to possess an Indonesian Citizenship Certificate (SBKRI), stating that: 'there is no such thing as indigenous and non-indigenous Indonesians. They (Chinese-Indonesians) are born here and made many contributions to this country. They are all Indonesian citizens' (Unidjaja, 2004: online). Even though Suharto had actually cancelled the SBKRI policy in 1996 through Presidential Decree No. 6/1996, and Wahid had also revoked a decree of the People's Consultative Assembly on the requirement for SBKRIs, officials had continued to require Chinese Indonesians to produce SBKRIs when applying for passports or identification cards. It should be noted, however, that even after Megawati's declaration, these rules were still being broken by officials at the local level (*Tempo*, 2004: online).

During the 2005 Chinese New Year celebrations, celebrated without incident, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, president since 20 October 2004, repeated that the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, including for followers of Confucianism, and stressed that such individuals should not hesitate to practise their beliefs (US Department of State, 2005: online). Yet, many Chinese Indonesians still argued in 2006 that they had to disguise their faiths, and that despite the official recognition of Confucianism alongside the previous five accepted religions of Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism and Buddhism, this acceptance and tolerance was yet to filter down to the local-level bureaucracy (Taufiqurrahman, 2006).

Change is certainly not occurring quickly. Answers have yet to be found regarding who were the Suharto era instigators of anti-Chinese violence and the violators of human rights in 1998 (*Agence France Presse*, 2005; Siboro, 2005; Bayuni, 2006; Junaidi, 2006). Despite various attempts to end discrimination against Chinese Indonesians, a total revision of policy has yet to come about, and approximately 60 of Indonesia's laws and ordinances continue to

discriminate against ethnic and religious minorities (Kurniawan and Moestafa, 2003; see also Hasani, 2002; Johnston, 2005; Taufiqurrahman, 2006). This ambiguity concerning the 'on-paper' status of Chinese Indonesians exemplifies the continuing instability and confusion regarding the role of Chinese Indonesians in Indonesia's future. Furthermore, as political commentators such as Samsori (2002) and Perkasa (2006) point out, regulating for change is not enough – it must be accompanied by 'socialisation'. Legislation alone cannot change deeply held views and opinions, and 'unwritten rules' cannot be changed by legislation. This was clearly highlighted during May 2006, when renewed hostilities towards Chinese Indonesians living in the city of Makassar, Sulawesi, flared after the death of a Indonesian (*pribumi*) maid working for a Chinese Indonesian. University students responded by threatening to target local Chinese Indonesians, who were quoted as being 'newcomers' by student representatives (Mariani, 2006; Perkasa, 2006).

Changing Chinese identities

During Suharto's years as president, intricate political strategies worked towards the effective erasure of Chinese identities from the public sphere. Yet, identities were not erased to the point where Chinese could assimilate into the majority population and become 'Indonesian' in mainstream society (Paris, 1998; Tan, 2001). Instead, the government installed thorough political checks and balances to maintain Chinese Indonesians as *orang Cina* – a derogatory term for Chinese – and ultimately reaffirm for the *pribumi* that the Chinese would always be known as such (Echols and Shadily, 1992; Aguilar, 2001; Budiman, 2005).

While this process during the New Order was largely obscured by the country's thriving economy, Chinese Indonesians were once again branded as 'the other' as a consequence of the economic crisis and the 1998 riots. It became clear, painfully quickly, that although many spoke only *Bahasa Indonesia* (the official Indonesian language) and were born in Indonesia, the Chinese could not identify themselves as Indonesians (in a *pribumi* sense) any longer. This abrupt fallout along ethnic lines was dramatic in

a variety of ways for many Chinese Indonesians. The severity of the anger that was directed towards the Chinese during the riots was a shock to many, and especially for a number of young Chinese born in Indonesia who had been educated in and had spoken *Bahasa* all their lives, for whom the very idea of 'being Chinese' was entirely new (Purdey, 2003).

The political 'othering' of the Chinese, both in the past and in the immediate lead-up to the riots, had a significant role to play in the devastation of the Chinese community in May 1998, particularly in Jakarta. While the Chinese may have tried to forget, at least in part, the extent of their 'alienness', in direct contrast the crafting of anti-Chinese sentiment in nationalist political discourse was an unremitting reminder of these differences to *pribumi* (Giblin, 2003). For *pribumi*, recognising the 'foreignness' of the Chinese along with their failure to be good 'nationalist' Indonesians made it all the more implausible that the Chinese could seemingly command such a large segment of the economy. Therefore, a purely economic injustice, caused in part by corrupt political processes, became a racial issue because of the erroneous equation of Chinese with wealth. At the core of this misguided assumption was the negative symbolism attached to 'Chineseness', manufactured to a great extent by the State. As such, this was not a straightforward problem of corruption and inequity between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', but rather one complicated by the fabricated vision of all Chinese as being automatically the (illegitimate) 'haves', while all *pribumi* were automatically (and incorrectly) the 'have-nots'. Despite Habibie's Presidential Decree of 1998, the *pribumi/non-pribumi* binary – which many commentators have rejected as meaningless at best, and highly divisive at worst – nonetheless continues to define the way in which many Indonesians understand 'Chineseness'. At a 2000 seminar on Chinese Indonesians in Bali, for example, the sociologist I Gede Pitana Brahmananda and the historian Nyoman Wijaya stressed the harmonious relationship between the Balinese and Chinese. However, their choice of language reflected deep-seated notions of otherness: the Balinese were referred to as 'locals' and the Chinese as 'outsiders', and, in an even more telling comment on ethnic divisions in Indonesia, ref-

erence was made to the fact that the Balinese divide the Chinese Indonesians into two categories, *Cina Bali* are those who integrate with the Balinese, and *Cina Jawa* are those who do not (Juniartha, 2000: online; confidential personal communication with academic, Bali, 2006).

It can thus be argued that, as a result of the 1998 riots and subsequent changes in the political realm, an emerging and ongoing process of re-identification has been set in motion for many Chinese Indonesians. No longer is Chinese Indonesian identity defined by *pembauran* (enforced assimilation). Instead, debates concerning the role of this community in the greater Indonesian society (such as the assimilation versus integration debate of the 1940s and 1950s) have begun to resurface (Purdey, 2003; see also numerous articles in *Jakarta Post* 1998–2006). Many Chinese who had begun the effort to merge into the broader national fabric of Indonesia, particularly during the pre-1998 period of economic growth, are now redirecting their actions. Yet, in resisting cultural erasure through assimilation, neither are they declaring themselves solely 'Chinese'. An example of this is apparent in a recent analysis of the so-called '*Cina Benteng*' phenomenon. '*Cina Benteng*' is the name given to members of the Chinese community of Tangerang in Jakarta, regarded as the oldest Chinese community in the area. The culture of the '*Cina Benteng*' is similar to that of the Baba Malays of Malaysia and Singapore, with their music, theatre, clothing and cuisine blending elements of Chinese and indigenous cultures. In their analysis of the '*Cina Benteng*', *Media Indonesia* journalists concluded that 'there is no discrimination in the cultural realm; there are problems in other realms, such as politics and economics' (*Media Indonesia*, 2002b: online). *Cina Benteng*-style 'assimilation', then, is one of the many ways in which Chinese Indonesians continue to situate themselves in contemporary Indonesia.

As well as the re-emergence in the public sphere of analyses like this, new identities are also developing. Rather than striving to assimilate into the *pribumi* majority, many Chinese Indonesians are taking on new approaches that favour 'ethnic promotion' through media and literary endeavours, via political representation and in the work of non-political organisations.

Chinese Indonesian media

The Chinese media in Indonesia has undergone a reawakening since the fall of Suharto, during whose time all Chinese-language newspapers were banned, except one *Yindunixiya Ribao* (*Harian Indonesia*), controlled by the military. Newspapers have now sprung up by the dozens, in both Chinese and Indonesian languages throughout the nation, in response to the growing demands of the Chinese Indonesian community (Pandiangan, 2003). Those published in *Bahasa Indonesia* include (but are not limited to) *Suar 168* whose vision is for a unified nation, with a market reach covering Java, Sumatra and parts of Kalimantan; *Sinergi Bangsa*, 'seeking ways to establish constructive synergy among the components of the Indonesian nation', with a market distribution through Java and Sumatra (Pandiangan, 2003: 417); *Simpatik*, considered a national newspaper that aims for justice for all; and *Garuda Visi*, again emphasising the unification of the nation, available on Java and Batam. In Mandarin and *Bahasa Indonesia* one can read the *Mandarin Pos* while, among others, the *Harian Umum Perdamaian* and *Zhi Nan Ri Bao* are available in Mandarin, the latter being a cooperative project between the *Jakarta Post* and *Kompas* (Pandiangan, 2003).

These newspapers have created an opening for Chinese to develop visions of their futures in Indonesia, with many articles underscoring the need to recognise and honour the country's religious and ethnic diversity, as well as objecting to discriminatory practices not yet dismantled or still being enacted against Chinese Indonesians. There is evidence of a strong push through much of this media to reconstruct the meaning of 'nationhood' now and for the future. Indeed, some newspapers such as Eddy Untung's *Yinhua Zhisheng*, published since July 1999, have announced a mission to increase a general awareness of a 'new' – read post-Suharto – Indonesia (Christianto, 2000). Even so, as Suryadinata (2001: 522) contemplates, at a more practical level, 'whether these publications will be able to survive given their limited readership and limited advertising remains to be seen'. Indeed, Pandiangan (2003) concludes that the immediate fate of these new media outlets will depend less on the attitude of the authorities,

and more on difficulties arising from inflexible management, limited editorial staff capabilities and funding and, in particular, a lack of advertisers (see also Christianto, 2000).

New literary expressions

Along with the media, there has been a rapid growth of new literary expressions by the Chinese in Indonesia. While Chinese Indonesian literature was nearly extinguished during Suharto's time, in the period since then this literature has undergone something of a renaissance. At least two organisations of Chinese Indonesian writers have been founded, 32 years after their forerunners were dissolved (Allen, 2003). Moreover, a Jakarta publisher is trying to recover late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Chinese literature in an effort to publish a series of anthologies of the work of Chinese writers in the Malay language, and thus salvage these works from neglect (Cohen, 2000).

Friendships between Chinese and *pribumi* Indonesians are also increasingly more common in fictional literary works. Likewise, television dramas such as *Cinta Terhalang Tembok* (Obstructed Love), *Ing, Tak Perlu Menangis* (Ing, No Need to Cry) and *Jangan Panggil Aku Cina* (Don't Call Me Chinese) – although not endorsed by all Chinese Indonesians because of the often assimilationist plots or negative stereotyping – have latched onto these friendship themes to stress the need for greater understanding across ethnic boundaries, 'mirroring a greater willingness to allow the open expression of Chinese culture in the years since the fall of Suharto' (Cohen, 2002: online). In 2002, Remy Silado, after much commercial success with his novel and blockbuster film about the Chinese in colonial Java, *Ca Bau Kan*,¹² continued his project of depicting the relationship between the Chinese and the Javanese through a 27-episode television dramatisation of the story of *Sam Poo Kong*, a Chinese messenger who landed on the coast of Semarang in 1401. Theatrical performances have also featured storylines projecting the message 'that two different ethnic groups living harmoniously together is not an unreachable dream' such as the July 2001 performance in Bali of 'The Legend of Balingkang', a love story between

the *pribumi* King Jayapangus and Kang Ci Wie, the daughter of a Chinese merchant (Juniartha, 2001: online).

A rather different dimension of 'Chineseness' was projected in a travelling exhibition by the poet, translator and amateur photographer Wilson Tjandinegara who, in addition to being involved in an ongoing project of literary translation from Mandarin to Indonesian, put together an exhibition of photographs depicting the poverty of Chinese Indonesians in Singkawang, West Kalimantan (*Fajar*, 2003). Such literary and cultural expressions, in sharp contrast to many past decades, are beginning to make available a far broader range of portrayals of the Chinese in Indonesia. These are being seen and appreciated by a general audience, and through such expressions current boundaries of identity formation may be renegotiated.

Representation in the political sphere

Suharto, to all intents and purposes, excluded Chinese Indonesians from the political spectrum, and consequently direct political representation of the Chinese during his administration was absent.¹³ Nevertheless, the elite or *cukong* (boss) Chinese still benefited from substantial covert political and economic influence by engaging in cronyism with political elites in the Indonesian government. As already noted, many Indonesians resented the fact that Suharto allowed a small minority of Chinese tycoons close to him to prosper through the distribution of monopolies (Kristof, 1998). Moreover, the Chinese community itself is by and large clearly disillusioned with earlier practices that enabled, among other things, a small segment of the Chinese elite to dictate such an excessive proportion of the economy. The turn towards political representation for some is therefore now linked into a broader movement among poorer and middle-class Chinese Indonesians to uncouple their identities from those of their rich elite Chinese counterparts and the crony politics of Suharto's presidency. This struggle to ascertain greater political representation, according to Chew, is part of a 'fundamental change in mood for the Chinese after the May riots' (Chew, 1999: online).

Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, relative political freedom has led to a surge in the

number of Chinese Indonesians now seeking active involvement in Indonesian politics. Yet, as might be expected, the Chinese community is internally divided as to what kind of representation should be sought, and how it might be achieved. There is considerable debate among Chinese communities regarding the degree to which they should maintain their 'otherness' in the political sphere. While some Chinese Indonesians have sought to form separate, ethnically based parties, others have sought representation within more mainstream parties (Giblin, 2003). For those Chinese who chose to form their own political parties, representation has not been necessarily straightforward. For example, only one political party *Partai Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity Party) was able to successfully contest the June 1999 general election (Giblin, 2003). Other parties, such as *Partai Reformasi Tionghoa Indonesia* (Chinese Indonesian Reform Party), and the *Partai Warga Bangsa Indonesia* (Indonesian Citizen's Party) – founded by Tan Suie Ling based on the idea that Chinese Indonesians needed a party to take on issues exclusive to their community – were unable to qualify to contest these elections (Chew, 1999; Giblin, 2003). In the 2004 general elections, not one ethnic Chinese political party qualified for participation (*Tempo*, 2004d).

Thee Kian Wie, an eminent economist and Chinese Indonesian, believes these developments towards greater political participation are constructive, but makes the case that Chinese should not create political parties along ethnic lines, stating that 'we become sectarian when we fight only for a particular race. I'm against parties based on ethnicity' (cited in Chew, 1999: online). Some Chinese Indonesians have indeed sought representation through more mainstream parties such as the National Mandate Party (PAN), *Nahdatul Ulama* (NU) and *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan* (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, *PDI Perjuangan*) (Mackie, 1999; Suryadinata, 2001), and in the 1999 general election four Chinese Indonesians standing for such parties won seats in the People's Consultative Assembly (*Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat*), including Kwik Kian Gie (Unidjaja and Gunawan, 2004).

It has been suggested that by working within these parties, Chinese Indonesians will have more access to the political process than they

would have by forming exclusively Chinese parties. Essentially, these political parties have adjusted their stances to accommodate religious and ethnic diversity among their constituents, making a special effort to gain the confidence of Christian and Chinese Indonesian voters and members. In the 2004 elections 172 Chinese Indonesians ran for office, while during the presidential elections, candidates such as Megawati Sukarnoputri and Wahid Hasyim used previously banned Chinese characters in their campaign posters to try to reach this segment of the voting population (Unidjaja and Gunawan, 2004).

In late 2003 Ignatius Wibowo sparked off a lively debate in the Indonesian daily *Kompas*, with a provocative article entitled *Demokrasi untuk Indonesia?* (Democracy for Indonesia?) in which he questioned whether Chinese Indonesians are any better off under the so-called democratic system. Drawing on Amy Chua's book *World of Fire*, Wibowo argued that democracy will not 'rescue' an ethnic minority that dominates a country's economy, and that, rather than putting an end to ethnic conflict, democracy may well worsen it (Wibowo, 2003). On this, the jury is still out, and after the presidential election of 2004, many Chinese Indonesians are worried regarding the success of vice president, Jusuf Kalla, known as openly discriminatory towards Chinese Indonesians (*Sinar Harapan*, 2004).

The growth of non-governmental organisations

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have a chequered history in Indonesia. During more accommodating times they have formed the basis of noteworthy social movements, covering a range of themes such as cultural, youth, educational and religious interests. Two of the most well-known NGO movements are the Muslim organisations *Muhammadiyah* and *Nahdlatul Ulama*, which have dealt with a broad range of social concerns such as health, education and religion. During the period surrounding the fall of Suharto and the expanding economic crisis, many NGOs – including the two above – stepped into the void left by paralysed public services, to help distribute food and health and education services to those most in need (Nagata, 2003).

In post-Suharto Indonesia, new civil rights and non-political organisations have played important functions in the emergence of new role models, aspirations and dynamics among the Chinese in a similar fashion, one might say, to newly formed political parties. Yet, some Chinese Indonesians have considered the NGO sector, rather than the political realm, to be a more suitable conduit through which to direct their energy and passions. As Suryadinata (2001: 512) has argued:

despite such movements into the political arena, many ethnic Chinese still suffered from political phobia. They felt that party politics was dangerous and an ethnic party would not be effective. They preferred to work with associations and pressure groups to fight discrimination. They wanted to establish NGOs that would promote ethnic Chinese interests.

One could contend that two broad groups of NGOs have emerged since the economic crisis, those working on anti-discrimination platforms, while the efforts of others are more explicitly addressing social and cultural concerns (Giblin, 2003). Two sociocultural NGOs increasingly recognised in Indonesia that have emerged are *Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia* (PSMTI, Chinese Indonesian Social Clan Association) and *Perhimpunan Indonesia Keturunan Tionghoa* (INTI, Association of Indonesians of Chinese Descent). PSMTI, chaired by Teddy Jusuf, is working to encourage young people to 'rediscover their Chinese identity' (Giblin, 2003: 358). Only Chinese Indonesians can become members of PSMTI, one of the first civil society groups to be established after the May 1998 violence. Indeed, of the NGO groups to have emerged, this is the only one to our knowledge that continues to bar non-Chinese from becoming full members.¹⁴ INTI, on the other hand, is open to Chinese and non-Chinese members, focusing on education, while some members actively campaign for greater political representation in government as well (Freedman, 2003).

Anti-discrimination groups, often politically inclined to some extent as well, have tended to be established by younger members of the Indonesian Chinese community. Determining how to best vocalise their concerns has been a

divisive issue for such organisations, in terms of whether their formation should be limited to the Chinese Indonesian community alone, or if establishing non-ethnic-based groups would be more effective. The youth involved, feeling largely frustrated by the slow process of rectifying discrimination against Chinese Indonesians, are now actively working towards propelling more rapid and substantial reforms. Such groups include, among others, *Solidaritas Pemuda Pemudi Tionghoa Untuk Keadilan* (SIMPATIK, Chinese Youth Solidarity for Justice), a small group of around a dozen people pushing for the development of democracy and improved human rights, and *Gerakan Perjuangan Anti Diskriminasi* (GANDI, Anti-discrimination Movement), a non-partisan organisation advocating for a reduction of discrimination based on ethnicity (Giblin, 2003).

Additional voluntary sector initiatives concerned with the restoration of ethnic harmony are also on the rise, in unforeseen and unexpected ways (Nagata, 2003). Multiethnic and multireligious organisations, increasingly accepted within the broader communities in which they work, are taking on quite progressive concerns. These include questions as to how Indonesian heritage should be negotiated and defined more broadly, as well as how best to recognise Chinese heritage more specifically – themes that indicate a considerable movement away from earlier cultural identity politics in Indonesia. *Badan Warisan Sumatera Utara* (The North Sumatra Heritage Trust) was formed in 1998 and ‘attempts to provide an intellectual, social and physical forum for the sharing of experiences and aspirations of the major ethnic groups of Northern Sumatra’ including Batak, Acehnese, Indian and Chinese populations (Nagata, 2003: 377). The organisation has now been given the go-ahead to restore a colonial-era residence of a Chinese merchant. As Nagata (2003) points out, ‘this recognition of Chinese heritage marks a landmark shift in the politics of cultural identity in Medan.’ In a similar vein, PSMTI has been invited to develop a Chinese Museum on two hectares of land in Taman Mini Indonesia Indah in East Jakarta that will document the history of Chinese settlements in Indonesia, highlighting their contribution to the nation (Kennedy, 2003).

Conclusions

Ever since the collapse of Suharto’s regime alternative discourses of identity for Chinese Indonesians have been actively negotiated and contested through the actions of the media, literature, political parties and NGOs. These have brought new and re-emerging notions of what it means to be Chinese Indonesian into the public realm, and in doing so have influenced Chinese Indonesians in their personal interpretations of self-identity, as well as being reflections of these.

The history of antagonism towards the Chinese Indonesians in Indonesia must not be forgotten so that the mistakes of the past can be avoided in the future. The tragic riots and murders that transpired in 1998 directly and disastrously impacted thousands of Chinese throughout Indonesia. It is evident that this crisis spurred a diverse range of reactions from Chinese Indonesians. While a number of wealthy Chinese, along with their much-needed capital, fled Indonesia, other affluent and many middle and lower class Chinese had very dissimilar reactions to these events. For these individuals there emerged a diverse range of long-term strategies interlinked with new and (re)emerging identity formations. While clearly revealing the incapacity or failure of the Suharto administration to assimilate the Chinese Indonesians into Indonesian society, these developments also make apparent that Indonesia must undergo substantive legal, political and ideological changes so that ethnic-based disasters, such as the atrocities of the past, can be circumvented in the future.

While it is hazardous and perhaps foolhardy to make predictions about what the future holds for Indonesia in general and for Chinese Indonesians in particular, research undertaken for this paper reveals a number of issues that will continue to affect the ways in which Chinese Indonesians understand themselves and are regarded by others. The first is the misguided notion that changing the rules will transform society. The sense of euphoria surrounding the successive lifting of restrictions on the ways in which Chinese Indonesians are allowed to function in post-Suharto Indonesian society has been associated with notions of freedom. But freedom from discriminatory legislation and

oppression does not automatically bring freedom from racism, hatred and vilification (see Perkasa, 2006). Changing legislation is a mechanical operation that can be executed swiftly and unequivocally, but transforming deeply held mindsets will be a far longer process, beset by division and uncertainty. As pointed out by Arief Budiman (2005: 100–101), Chinese Indonesians remain cautious and ‘somewhat confused’.

Finally, it is worth extrapolating from Ignatius Wibowo’s caution about expecting too much from ‘democracy’. While he bases his argument on economic considerations – namely that an economically dominant minority group will face difficulties in a system that combines democracy with a free market economy – there is also evidence in Indonesia (Aceh, Poso, the Moluccas) that in some quarters ‘democracy’ is interpreted as a licence to express, and to act upon, long-suppressed hatreds and tensions. Like other groups disenchanted with the tangible benefits of ‘democracy’, Chinese Indonesians may find that democracy fails to deliver on its promises.

Notes

- 1 There are obvious concerns regarding terminology in any discussion of ‘the Chinese’ in Indonesia. A number of recent contributors to the field have used the term ‘ethnic Chinese’ or ‘Chinese Indonesians’ to define those Chinese residing in Indonesia (or who have resided in Indonesia and still associate themselves with that country in some manner) who identify themselves, or are identified by others in society, as being Chinese. This is done regardless of whether they are Indonesian citizens or not, and regardless of whether they have mixed blood or not (Mackie and Coppel, 1976). The use of these two terms in this paper also follows the suggestion of Mitchell (2003: 392–407) that ‘any group that identifies itself as sharing a common heritage and belonging together and distinct from other groups can be considered ethnic’. At the same time, we stress our awareness of the heterogeneity of the Chinese in Indonesia.
- 2 *Pribumi* literally means ‘sons of the soil’ or ‘of native stock and not of immigrant blood’ and relates to indigenous Indonesians regardless of their specific regional culture within the country (Echols and Shadily, 1992: 436).
- 3 This paper complements one published by Turner (2003) that discussed the situation for Chinese Indonesians from 1998 to 2002. This paper extends that analysis through to May 2006.
- 4 The first Chinese migrants to Indonesia originated from four ethnic groups, predominantly from the two provinces of Fujian and Guangdong in south-east China (Mackie and Coppel, 1976). The Hokkien were the first to settle in Indonesia. Proficient traders, these entrepreneurs dominated the local economies of Eastern Indonesia, Central and East Java, and the west coast of Sumatra. A second group, the Teochiu concentrated themselves along Sumatra’s east coast, the Riau islands and Kalimantan. Their members initially specialised in agriculture but, over time, progressed into commercial areas where the Hokkien were not represented. The third group, the Hakka, came from agriculturally unproductive mountainous areas in Guangdong (Turner, 2003). They established themselves on the outer islands of Indonesia, such as Kalimantan, and exploited many of the vast natural mineral resources in those areas. Hakka individuals continue to dominate many aspects of economic society in these regions today. The Cantonese was the other significant group to settle in Indonesia. Although smaller in number than the Hokkien and Hakka, the majority of Cantonese were wealthier and skilled in mechanics and industry, the combination of which allowed them to launch themselves as artisans and machine workers throughout the archipelago (Schwartz, 1994). Over time, these four groups, although clearly heterogeneous regarding their places of origin, reasons for moving to Indonesia and skills, came to constitute a group towards which generalised anti-Chinese sentiment was directed.
- 5 Nationalist sentiment rose rapidly during the early part of the twentieth century as a result of growing anti-Dutch sentiment. The nationalist movement’s leader, Sukarno, led the country to independence following the Japanese defeat in 1945.
- 6 See Suryadinata (1978: 129–138) for more specific details of Sukarno’s policies towards the Chinese, including the ‘Benteng System’ and the ‘Assaat Movement’.
- 7 A division can also be made between the locally born, Indonesian-speaking, *peranakan* Chinese, and *totok* Chinese who are comparatively recent, foreign-born migrants. For more on this division, see Schwartz (1994), Suryadinata (1998, 2001) and Aguilar (2001).
- 8 For example, consider the substantial wealth of a few Chinese individuals such as Eka Tjipta Wijaya, Liem Sioe Liong and Mochtar Riady, who have built economic empires through personal contacts with important politicians and bureaucrats. See also Suryadinata (1995) and Hill (1996).
- 9 See Purdey (2005) for an analysis of the efforts to ‘bring the Chinese home’.
- 10 After the 1965 coup all Chinese-language newspapers were banned, with the exception of one that was government controlled. See Suryadinata (1978) and Kakiailatu (this issue).
- 11 An interesting response to this new freedom was expressed in interviews with Chinese Indonesians in Tangerang, some of whom suggested that now that they could conduct their New Year celebrations in public

places, the occasion had lost some of its romanticism and its 'specialness' and that 'freedom' meant that everyone went off and did their own thing, rather than celebrating as a tight-knit community (see *Gatra*, 2003: online).

- 12 The word *ca-bau-kan*, meaning 'woman' in Hokkien, was appropriated in colonial times to mean the native concubine of a Chinese man.
- 13 It can also be argued that the majority of Indonesians did not gain genuine political representation during this period and that the problem was not limited to the Chinese. However, no government representatives were Chinese, whereas certain other ethnic groups did have some direct representation.
- 14 Non-Chinese Indonesians who are part of the family of a member, or who are working on issues of importance to Chinese Indonesians, can become 'honorary members' (Giblin, 2003).

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