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An End to Discrimination for China and the Chinese in Indonesia?

*By Leo Suryadinata**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On 12 March 2014, President Yudhoyono nullified the notorious Cabinet Presidium Circular (1967) obliging Indonesian government agencies to use a derogatory term *Tjina (Cina)* to refer to China and the Chinese.
- *Tionghoa* and *Tiongkok* have been readopted instead.
- President Yudhoyono appears to have a few objectives in issuing the decree at this time: firstly, to further improve Chinese and indigenous Indonesians relations; secondly, to send a signal to China that Jakarta would continue to promote cordial relations with Beijing; thirdly, to gain support from Chinese Indonesians for his party, which has been declining in popularity with respect to the April parliamentary election; and fourthly, to be remembered as the President who abolished the official use of the derogatory term.

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- Although his initiative will oblige government agencies to use *Tionghoa* and *Tiongkok*, it will not stop the daily use of the term *Cina* or its use in the non-governmental sector. The legacy of Suharto's 32-year rule is not likely to be abandoned overnight. However, the Presidential Decree is welcomed by many Chinese Indonesians and China.

INTRODUCTION

On 12 March 2014, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono issued a Presidential Decree¹ to regulate references to the People's Republic of China and Indonesians of Chinese descent. This ruling effectively nullifies a 1967 Circular of Cabinet Presidium² that introduced *Tjina*—a term that has acquired a derogatory meaning—to replace *Tionghoa/Tiongkok*. It specifies that for “all activities within the governmental circle, the use of the term *Tjina/China/Cina* is to be changed to *orang* (person) or *komunitas* (community) *Tionghoa*, and the reference to—*Republik Rakyat China*—will be changed to *Republik Rakyat Tiongkok*”³ with immediate effect.

What is so significant about the changing of these terms? Why does it come now—forty-seven years after the promulgation of the Circular? What objectives does it hope to achieve? What is the likely impact of this change on ethnic and inter-state relations?

FROM *TJINA* TO *TIONGHOA* AND *TIONGKOK*

Let us first look at the meaning of *Tjina* (the spelling after 1972: *Cina*). It was used to refer to both China and its people in Indonesia before the turn of the 20th century without any derogatory meaning. The first documented use of the word can be found in the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) which was written in the 17th century. The Chinese appeared to have used it to identify themselves in the Malay world during that period. However, with the rise of Chinese cultural nationalism at the turn of the 20th century and the formation of the Republic of China (*Republik Tiongkok*) in 1912, many Chinese in colonial Indonesia considered *Cina* to be old-fashioned; and they began to use *Tionghoa* to refer to Chinese, and *Tiongkok* to denote China.

Initially, *Tionghoa* and *Tjina* were used interchangeably but gradually the peranakan and indigenous newspapers came to use *Tionghoa* to refer to the Chinese.⁴ After the re-unification of China under the Kuomintang in 1928, the Dutch colonial government also adopted *Tionghoa* and *Tiongkok* for use in their local official documents. It was around this time that *Tjina* became an ethnic stereotype which had the negative connotations of being greedy, unclean, lazy, weak and even immoral.⁵

¹ Keppres No.12 /2014. The full name of the decree: Keputusan Presiden Republik Indonesia Nomor 12 Tahun 2014 tentang Pencabutan Surat Presidium Kabinet Ampera Nomor SE-06/PRES.KAB/6/1967, Tanggal 28 Juni 1967.

² Circular of Cabinet Presidium No.SE-06/Pre.Kab/6/1967.

³ Author's translation.

⁴ In contrast, peranakan newspapers used “Indonesier” or orang/bangsa Indonesia to refer to the indigenous Indonesians (Boemipoetra) and Indonesia to refer to Hindia Belanda (Dutch East Indies).

⁵ For a comprehensive analysis on how the terms acquired their derogatory meanings, refer to my joint paper with Charles Coppel entitled “The use of the terms “Tjina” and “Tionghoa” in Indonesia: An Historical Survey”, *Papers*

Tionghoa is the Hokkien pronunciation of *Zhonghua*(中华), a term that denotes the Chinese people in China⁶, while *Tiongkok* is Hokkien for *Zhongguo* (中国), meaning the Middle Kingdom) which refers to the country of China. The two terms were popularised in China and among overseas Chinese only in the 20th century, following the rise of Chinese cultural and political nationalism. The terms in Indonesia were in Hokkien because this dialect group was the earliest and the largest in Java. It is also worth noting that the Japanese before and during the anti-Japanese War in China called China *Shina* (支那) and Chinese *Shina jin* (支那人), which further made *Tjina* unpopular among the Chinese, including those in Indonesia.

Since the late 1920s, *Tionghoa* and *Tiongkok* became firmly accepted in Indonesia, particularly in Java, and *Tjina* was only used when the Indonesians wanted to belittle their Chinese counterparts. Not surprisingly, the Indonesian name for the Republic of China was *Republik Tiongkok* and after 1949, the Indonesian name of People's Republic of China was *Republik Rakjat Tiongkok* (RRT). Both terms, *Tionghoa* and *Tiongkok*, had become popular in Indonesia sometime between the 1920s and 1965 at least.

FROM TIONGHOA, TIONGKOK TO TJINA/CINA⁷

The September 30 Movement (G-30-S), also known as the 1965 coup, was a pivotal event in Indonesian history that ended a leftwing government and gave rise to a rightwing regime. The official history in government-issued school textbooks describes a coup that was initiated by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), a sizable party that had close ties with President Sukarno and that was supported by the People's Republic of China (PRC). The Chinese Indonesian organization, Baperki (Indonesian Citizenship Consultative Body), was implicated in the coup as it was close to Sukarno and the PKI. There were other different accounts which pointed the finger at the military's internal struggle, the CIA involvement, as well as Suharto's suspected role.

on *Far Eastern History* (ANU), no.2 (September 1970), pp.97-118.

⁶ The term was a combination of *Zhong Guo* (中国 Middle kingdom) and *Huaxia* (华夏 ancient name of the Chinese people, mainly the Han). Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming Dynasty, launched a slogan: *Quzhu hulu, jianli Zhonghua* (驱逐胡虏, 建立中华 Expel the foreign group, establish *Zhonghua*). *Zhonghua* was used to refer to the Chinese people based on Han. Dr Sun Yatsen, the founder of the Republic of China, in his anti-Manchu campaign also had a slogan: *Quzhu dalu, jianli Zhonghua* (驱逐鞑虏, 建立中华). Apparently he borrowed the slogan from Zhu Yuanzhang, *Zhonghua* is also used to refer to the Han Chinese. Nevertheless, once the Republic was established, Dr.Sun quickly used the term to refer to all Chinese. See Chen Lian-kai陈连开, *Zhonghua minzu yanjiu chutan* 中华民族研究初探 Beijing: Zhishi Publisher, 1994, especially pp.64-65.

⁷ Many facts in this section are taken from my earlier joint paper with Charles Coppel entitled "The use of the terms "Tjina" and "Tionghoa" in Indonesia: An Historical Survey", *Papers on Far Eastern History* (ANU), no.2 (September 1970), pp.97-118.

For the purpose of our discussion, what is more important is the result of the 1965 coup and the perception of the PRC and the Chinese minority by the new authorities. The 1965 coup resulted in the banning of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), the downfall of President Sukarno and the rise of the military led by General Suharto. The anti-communist military government accused Beijing of supporting the PKI, while Beijing was stayed equally hostile towards Jakarta. Not surprisingly, relations between the PRC and Indonesia deteriorated and the two countries eventually suspended diplomatic ties in October 1967.

On 25-31 August 1966 in Bandung, the Indonesian Army held their second seminar aimed at reformulating army doctrine and redefining their political role and programme. At one of the seminar resolutions it was decided that *Tiongkok* and *Tionghoa* would be replaced by a single *Tjina*. The full translation of this decision is as follows:

In order to restore the general term to the usage which has commonly been found everywhere, both at home and abroad, and in various languages, as the term for the State and citizens concerned, but particularly in order to remove a feeling of inferiority on the part of our own people, while on the other hand, removing the feeling of superiority on the part of the group concerned within our State, it is therefore proper for us to report that the seminar has decided to use again as the term for the People's Republic of China (Republik Rakjat Tiongkok) and its citizens, "Republik Rakyat Tjina" (People's Republic of China) and "warganegara Tjina" (Chinese citizens). This may be justified seen from the historical and sociological points of view.⁸

Why did an army seminar include a resolution on such a name-change? According to rumours, there was a group of anti-Chinese generals who wanted to introduce more concrete anti-Chinese measures targeted at Chinese Indonesians, but were opposed by the Suharto group (including many economists) which feared that such a policy would endanger the new cabinet programme aimed at restoring economic stability. If the rumour were true, then the resolution would seem to have been a concession made to the more anti-Chinese generals.

It is clear from the resolution that the change of terminology was meant to humiliate the PRC and its citizens. It argued that the change would suppress the superiority complex of the Chinese in Indonesia and lessen the inferiority complex of indigenous Indonesians. While the resolution stated that the term would be confined

⁸ "Laporan penutupan seminar AD ke-II/1966 kepada Men/Pangad oleh Letdjjen M Panggabean" in *Amanat/Pidato Prasaran dalam Seminar AD ke-II/1966*. (Jakarta, 1967), p.280.

to PRC citizens, this was impossible in reality. Indeed, in practice, the term was used for all Chinese regardless of citizenship.

Civilians and military men treated the decision with deference. Most newspapers and government agencies complied and radio announcements started to use *Tjina* for both China and ethnic Chinese. However, many Indonesian intellectuals disagreed with the use of *Tjina* and argued that it was a form of racialism. Mochtar Lubis, a leading Indonesian writer and journalist who was detained by Sukarno for many years because of his criticism of corruption in high places, argued that the use of *Tjina* “might be suitable to show our anger to Beijing, but the word itself is used because it is felt to embody an element insulting to the Chinese group.”⁹ He also warned that the denotation of the term could not possibly be confined to PRC citizens alone, but would also hurt Indonesians of Chinese descent.¹⁰ He was of the view that Indonesia was too great a nation to adopt the childish posture of trading insult for insult. A Harvard-trained Chinese intellectual, Lie Tek Tjeng, who worked for the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), also disagreed with the term because of its racist implication, but many *peranakan* Chinese leaders from the pro-military assimilation group wanted the use of *Tjina* to be confined to PRC citizens while Chinese Indonesians should be called either *Tionghoa* or *Peranakan*.¹¹

The anti-Chinese faction did not give in. In the army newspaper *Angkatan Bersendjata*, a writer called Zahri Ahmad justified the use of the term *Tjina* from a historical and linguistic point of view.¹² He did not think that the term *Tjina* was insulting; and even if it were, he argued that it did not emanate from the Indonesian people—the Chinese community had inflicted the wound upon itself just as they had wounded indigenous Indonesians by calling them *Hoana*.¹³

In June 1966, the University of Indonesia arranged a workshop in Jakarta on the problem of the foreign and stateless Chinese (*Masalah WNA Tjina dan Orang-orang Tanpa Negara*) to help the new military government formulate a general policy. Some participants went out of their way to use *Tionghoa* in their papers although the name of the workshop used *Tjina*.

The anti-Chinese military group appeared to gain the upper hand, and on 28 June 1967, the Cabinet Presidium issued a circular (*Surat Edaran Presidium Kabinet Ampera 1967*) which confirmed the army seminar's decision to use *Tjina* and abandoned *Tiongkok* and *Tionghoa*.¹⁴ It justified the decision by references to the historical claims of *Tjina* and the alleged preference of the Indonesian people for that

⁹ Mochtar Lubis, “Surat dari Bangkok”, *Kompas*, 28 April 1966.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Harian Kami*, 7 October 1967.

¹² *Angkatan Bersendjata*, 8 May 1967.

¹³ *Hoanna* is the Hokkien pronunciation of 番人 (*Fanren*), meaning: uncivilized people.

¹⁴ The full name of the circular: “Surat Edaran Presidium Kabinet Ampera Nomor SE-06/PRES.KAB/6/1967, tanggal 28 Juni 1967”. See *Ampera*, 26 July 1967 for the report.

term. It urged Indonesian newspapers and publications to comply with the decision in order to avoid confusion. Once the Circular was issued, all publications followed its lead. The two exceptions were Mochtar Lubis's *Indonesia Raya* which consistently used the term *Tionghoa* in its articles; and B.M. Diah's nationalist newspaper *Merdeka*.

RESPONSE OF THE PRC AND THE CHINESE IN INDONESIA

Relations between Beijing and Jakarta were already tense when the Circular came into effect, but the two countries still maintained diplomatic ties. In March 1967, Chinese diplomats received an invitation to attend the opening and closing sessions of the Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat Sementara, Indonesia's highest legislative body. It was addressed to "Republic of China" and not to "People's Republic of China". The Chinese diplomats protested, and they later received a new invitation which was addressed to "People's Republic of Tjina"!¹⁵ The PRC protested again but it was in vain. Relations between Jakarta and Beijing deteriorated and by 31 October, the two countries severed diplomatic relations following similar and other rifts.

The older generation of Chinese Indonesians and those who understood Chinese and Indonesian contemporary history rejected the term *Tjina*. They continued to use *Tionghoa* or the English terms *China* and *Chinese* when talking or writing in Indonesian. Arief Budiman (Soe Hok Djinn), a sociologist and a social/political activist, decided to accept the term *Tjina*. He argued that since it was impossible to get rid of the term, under such circumstances, the best way to combat humiliation was to use the derogatory term as an ordinary term.¹⁶ However, his view was not shared by the older generation and many Chinese who knew the background of the adoption of the term.

After Suharto stepped down in May 1998, Chinese Indonesian organizations emerged and all of them used *Tionghoa* in the name of their organizations. Many well-known Chinese Indonesians appealed to the government to withdraw the 1967 Cabinet Presidium Circular but failed to get a response. However, many young Chinese Indonesians, especially peranakan Chinese born and brought up during the Suharto era, were unaware of this historical baggage. Some even insisted on using *Cina* (the post-1972 spelling of *Tjina*) rather than *Tionghoa*, and were supported by some indigenous Indonesians who were using the historical and linguistic argument for continuing the use of the derogatory term.

¹⁵ NCNA (Hsinhua), 7 March 1967.

¹⁶ Arief Budiman, "Cina atau Tionghoa", Moch Sa'dum M, ed. *Pri-Nonpri Mencari Format Baru Pembauran*, Jakarta: Cides, 1999, p.117-119.

AFTER DIPLOMATIC NORMALIZATION

Beijing and Jakarta resumed diplomatic ties after 22 years in August 1990, after having revisited the issue of the Indonesian name for China earlier in 1989.¹⁷ Beijing wanted to use the old name, *Republik Rakyat Tiongkok* while Jakarta insisted on using *Republik Rakyat Cina*. Eventually both sides agreed to adopt the English term “China” as the Indonesian name of the country and it became “Republik Rakyat China”. However, “China” is often pronounced as *Cina* in Indonesian and Malay, and most of the Indonesian newspapers continued to call China and the Chinese population *Cina*.

After the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, relations between Beijing and Jakarta improved. Both Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri visited China, and Chinese leaders Zhu Rongji, Wen Jiabao, Hu Jintao and most recently, Xi Jinping, also came to Jakarta. In 2005, Beijing and Jakarta even signed the Strategic Partnership agreement¹⁸ to foster socio-economic and military cooperation. When the Indonesian leaders addressed their Chinese counterparts, the terms *Tiongkok* and *Tionghoa* were used. Nevertheless, the 1967 Cabinet Presidium Circular was not withdrawn, and the press continued to use both “China” and “*Cina*” to refer to the PRC and its people.

WHY PRESIDENTIAL DECREE NO. 12/2014?

The most recent Presidential Decree states that the 1967 Cabinet Presidium Circular which changed *Tiongkok/Tionghoa* to *Tjina* had “created a psychological and discriminative impact on social relations which are experienced by members of the Indonesian nation who are of Chinese descent”. It also says that the term is discriminatory and against existing Indonesian anti-racist laws, and therefore the Circular has to be withdrawn. In addition, the Decree notes that the relationship between Indonesia and the PRC has become closer and it is appropriate to revert the name of the country to *Republik Rakyat Tiongkok*.

President Yudhoyono appeared to have two objectives in issuing the decree. Domestically, the President would like to improve ethnic relations as he realized that the term *Cina/Tjina* was derogatory. Internationally, by restoring the original Indonesian name of the PRC, he is sending a signal to Beijing that Jakarta is willing to further improve diplomatic relations.

¹⁷ Beijing was diplomatically isolated after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident and was eager to normalize relations with Indonesia.

¹⁸ This was upgraded to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership after Xi Jinping's visit in 2013.

However, this does not answer the question why it took so long to introduce the change—a considerable forty-seven years after the promulgation of the Circular, and when debates on *Cina* and *Tionghoa/Tiongkok* had been going on and off over the years. Many leading Chinese Indonesians, including lawyer Eddie Sadeli (Lin Xiangshen),¹⁹ sent in petitions to various presidents and the high court, requesting the nullification of the 1967 Cabinet Circular. All such efforts fail. Early this year, there were heated debates on the term *Cina* in Jakarta again, with many leading Chinese Indonesians being resentful of the term.

Eddie Lembong, the founding president of Perhimpunan INTI (a large Chinese Indonesian organization) and founder of the Yayasan Nabil (Nation-Building Foundation), was particularly critical of the existence of the 1967 Circular. According to one report, on 12 February 2014, Eddie Lembong met with Murdaya Poo, a wealthy businessman and an ex-MP who is close to President Yudhoyono, at a dinner reception. They discussed the matter and the following day, Eddie provided all the necessary information regarding the Cabinet Circular and the history of the use of *Cina* to Murdaya.²⁰ On 26 February, Murdaya also got his Hakka Federation (Keshu Lianyi Hui) to form a delegation to visit the President at his Bogor Palace, and submitted a petition there.²¹ On the same day, Eddie Sadeli, representing the Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia (PSMTI), drafted a petition to be sent to the President.²² Within a short time, the President made up his mind and decided to issue a decree. On 11 March 2014, one day before Yudhoyono signed the Presidential Decree, Mari Pangestu (alias Feng Huilan), his Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, made a speech at the New Council Ceremony of Huian Huiguan, a Chinese clan association in Jakarta, revealing that President Yudhoyono was about to nullify the Cabinet Presidium Circular.²³

The withdrawal of the 1967 Cabinet Presidium Circular was made possible by a series of events and conditions following the fall of Suharto. Indonesia has become more liberal and Chinese Indonesians have been free to practice their customs and religions, and retain their cultural identity. Previous presidents such as Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Megawati had issued a number of regulations favouring Chinese Indonesians. However, all had failed to nullify the 1967 Cabinet Presidium Circular. Perhaps it took an ex-military man like Yudhoyono to withdraw a decision made by the Indonesian military.

¹⁹ For various attempts made by Eddie Sadeli, an interview with him published in *Guoji Ribao*, 35 March 2014.

²⁰ “Angpao besar di Perayaan Cap Go Mei 2014” (statement provided by the Secretariat of Yayasan Nabil, 18 March 2014). *Yinni Xingzhou Ribao* (印尼星洲日报), 22 March 2014,

²¹ “Zongtong chexiao Zhinaqishixing chenghu 总统撤销支那歧视性称呼” *Yinni Xingzhou Ribao* (印尼星洲日报), 22 March 2014. *Guoji Ribao*, 22 March 2014.

²² “Huazu yiyuan houxuanren fangtanlu 华族议员候选人访谈录”, *Guoji Ribao* (国际日报), 22 March 2014.

²³ “Youduoyuenuo jijiang qiانشu zongtong minglingshu 尤多约诺即将签署总统命令书”, *Qiandao Ribao* (千岛日报), 13 March 2014.

However, the question can still be posed about what benefits the President would gain by issuing this decree. Arguably, it may have been an attempt to boost Partai Demokrat's declining popularity by winning over Chinese Indonesian support at the parliamentary election held on 9 April 2014. In addition, this is his last term and the Decree will become the legacy of his presidency. He will be remembered in Indonesian history as the President who abolished the official use of the derogatory *Cina*. In addition, the decree will be welcome by both ethnic Chinese and the government of China.

But will the withdrawal of the 1967 Circular and the official abandonment of the derogatory term mean that the term *Cina* will disappear? Government documents and publications will most certainly abandon the term, but it does not mean that it will no longer be used by Indonesians. The legacy of Suharto's 32-year rule cannot be erased by a presidential decree. It may take a long time for the people to get used to the two terms again.

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