

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia: Changing Identity Politics and the Paradox of Sinification**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Almost two decades after post-Suharto reforms began, Chinese Indonesians no longer face the forced assimilation and legislative discrimination they endured under Suharto's New Order regime. Since 1998, Chinese Indonesian identity politics and culture have flourished, and Chinese organizations, media and Mandarin language education are once again back in the public domain. Scholars term the phenomenon '(re)Sinification' or a 'return' to Chinese culture.
- Politically, Chinese Indonesians now have greater representation and participation than ever before. However, far from being 'unified,' their political views and aspirations are extremely diverse.
- In recent years, motivated by the economic lure of a rising China, closer bilateral ties between China and Indonesia, and a sentimental desire for a return to Chinese modes of identification, many Chinese Indonesians, especially those from the *totok* (generally understood as 'unacculturated' or 'purer' Chinese, usually able to speak Mandarin) business community have culturally and linguistically reoriented themselves towards Mainland China, as well as forged closer commercial ties with PRC government and businesses.
- Within the new climate of Sino-Indonesian cooperation, Chinese Indonesians can potentially play an important cultural and commercial 'bridging' role.

- Nevertheless, considering the violent history of racism against Chinese Indonesians, as well as undercurrents of anti-PRC sentiments in Indonesia, more critical questions need to be asked about the potential dangers of ‘Sinification’ for Indonesia’s ethnic Chinese.

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## INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about Chinese Indonesians since the fall of Suharto in 1998. Since the abolition of the New Order's forced assimilation policy, Chinese Indonesian identity politics have flourished, prompting scholars and observers to laud the 'return' of Chinese culture and identity in Indonesia. Indeed, the dramatic resurgence of Chinese identity politics in Indonesia has been nothing short of remarkable. Where during the New Order, Chinese languages, media, organisations and schools were banned, today, Chinese New Year is celebrated as a national holiday, Chinese cultural expressions can be displayed publicly, Chinese organizations have re-emerged, and the uptake of Mandarin among both Chinese and non-Chinese (*pribumi*, meaning indigenous) Indonesians has sky-rocketed. Furthermore, when during the New Order, Chinese Indonesians were noticeably absent from politics, today, Chinese Indonesian politicians are present at various levels of government as administrators and elected members of parliament, most notably in the controversial figure of Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok).

More recently, there has been a trend of 'Sinification' among sections of the Chinese Indonesian community (particularly among the *totok*<sup>1</sup> business community) whereby, within the context of the rise of China and the burgeoning bilateral relationship between Indonesia and China in the last decade, a growing closeness with China is matched by an increased use of Mandarin and a cultural reorientation towards Mainland Chineseness. Considering the history of anti-Chinese sentiments (both towards the PRC as a state and towards Chinese Indonesians) in Indonesia, it is important to assess how this trend is perceived by *pribumi* Indonesians, and also by other ethnic Chinese who may oppose an 'overt' display of Chineseness and closeness with China.

This article provides a critical assessment of the current state of Chinese identity politics in Indonesia. In particular, it examines the potential advantages and disadvantages of a Chinese Indonesian cultural and economic reorientation towards Mainland China.

## EMERGING FROM A PROBLEMATIC HISTORY

The story of Chinese Indonesians is one that has fascinated scholars and observers for many years. A classic example of what Amy Chua (2004) terms 'market dominant minority', since the Dutch colonial era, the ethnic Chinese of Indonesia are commonly perceived as economically strong but politically weak. Furthermore, their inability to lay claim to indigenous modes of belonging in Indonesia meant that Chinese Indonesians have been perpetually viewed as foreigners whose national belonging and loyalty were always in question. This precarious situation made them easy victims of racialized violence during episodes of political or economic instability, the most recent – and notorious – example

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between *totok* and *peranakan* (generally understood as non-Chinese speaking, 'acculturated' Chinese with mixed ancestry and their own distinct culture) Chinese Indonesians is complex. Furthermore, largely because of assimilation under the New Order, the traditional boundaries between *totok* and *peranakan* have become blurred. However, for the sake of simplicity, throughout this article, the terms '*totok*' and '*peranakan*' are used to distinguish between Chinese Indonesians who can and cannot speak Chinese, and between those who are more and less oriented towards Chinese culture respectively.

being the anti-Chinese attacks that occurred during the riots of 13-14 May 1998 in Jakarta, Solo, and a number of other localities.

Over the three decades of assimilation under the New Order (from 1966 to 1998), Chinese Indonesian culture and identity were in many ways ‘erased’ or at least hidden from public view, although their forced assimilation also had the paradoxical effect of accentuating the group’s essential foreignness in the national imagination (Coppel, 1983; Hoon, 2008; Suryadinata, 1978). As has been widely noted, the situation changed dramatically for Chinese Indonesians after the fall of the New Order regime in May 1998 that followed months of economic and political instability, widespread riots and anti-Chinese attacks (Purdey, 2006).

In the aftermath of the May 1998 riots, the successive post-Suharto Indonesian governments quickly attempted to ‘remedy’ the situation by abolishing the New Order’s assimilation policy. This new policy of tolerance towards the ethnic Chinese heralded a new era of ‘re-Sinification’ that saw a dramatic revival of Chinese socio-political organisations, languages and media. Almost overnight, the number of Chinese Indonesian organizations multiplied so much that by 2007, there were at least an estimated 176 Chinese voluntary associations across Indonesia, the majority being clan associations that were dormant throughout the New Order (Dawis, 2010). Many of the larger ‘umbrella’ organizations such as the Chinese Indonesian Association (*Perhimpunan Indonesia Tionghoa* or INTI) and the Indonesian Chinese Social Organization (*Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia* or PSMTI) were new and part of a concerted effort by Chinese Indonesian leaders and activists to ensure greater socio-political representation for ethnic Chinese.

A number of these associations have had success advocating for recognition of Chinese Indonesian rights. For example, INTI, together with the now defunct Chinese Indonesian Political Party (*Partai Tionghoa Indonesia* or PARTI), and the Anti-Discrimination Movement (*Gerakan Anti Diskriminasi* or GANDI) were instrumental in the instalment of new Citizenship Law No. 12/2006 that recognizes all Indonesian-born ethnic Chinese as Indonesian citizens. Furthermore, partly due to long-time lobbying by INTI, in 2014, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono changed the term ‘*Cina*’ (considered derogatory by many ethnic Chinese) to the much more acceptable term ‘*Tionghoa*’ for use in public discourses.<sup>2</sup> On the cultural front, PSMTI successfully established the Chinese Indonesian exhibit (*Taman Budaya Tionghoa*) at *Taman Mini Indonesia Indah* (Mini Indonesia Park), while the Supreme Council for Confucian Religion in Indonesia (*Majelis Tinggi Agama Konghucu Indonesia* or MATAKIN) was successful in pushing for the recognition of Chinese New Year as a religious Confucian national holiday in Indonesia.

In the political arena, where they were once weak, a growing number of Chinese Indonesians have participated in local and national legislative elections. There were 100 ethnic Chinese candidates in the 2004 elections, 213 in the 2009 elections, and 315

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<http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2014/03/19/1458446/Presiden.SBY.Ganti.Istilah.China.Menjadi.Tionghoa> (accessed 9 March 2016)

candidates in the 2014 elections.<sup>3</sup> Presently, 18 elected members of the national parliament are ethnic Chinese from various political parties (notably, 14 MPs are from PDI-P).

As mentioned before, the most popular and controversial Chinese Indonesian politician is current Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok). Formerly Regent of East Belitung Regency in the Bangka-Belitung Province, and also a former member of parliament for Golkar, Ahok rose to national prominence when he became the running-mate of Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in the 2012 Jakarta gubernatorial race. Succeeding as Governor when Jokowi became President in 2014, Ahok has been a constant fixture in national politics ever since.

Outspoken, keen to enforce his own reform agenda, and with a brash public persona, Ahok is a divisive figure, both among the general public and among Chinese Indonesians. While many applaud Ahok's bold policies, which include the building of Jakarta's long-awaited underground metro system and the (forced) relocation of thousands of poor slum residents along Jakarta's filthy river banks, others are wary of his take-no-prisoners attitude. Many Chinese Indonesians in particular are worried that negative perceptions of Ahok will reflect badly on all Chinese in general.

Indeed, the issues of politics and representation are divisive issues for Chinese Indonesians. Almost two decades after the beginning of *reformasi* and with demands for the abolition of anti-Chinese policies already achieved, the political concerns and aspirations of contemporary Chinese Indonesians are no longer fixated on the goal of receiving recognition. It needs to be remembered that, after all, Chinese Indonesians are a heterogenous group and there is no such thing as a unified Chinese vote or 'voice.'

## **KEEPING UP WITH THE RISE OF CHINA**

Another important issue that has created rifts among Chinese Indonesians is the trend of overt Sinification and closeness to China (Hoon, 2006; Setijadi, 2015).

It is easy to understand why many Chinese Indonesians embraced Chinese culture and chose to orient themselves towards Mainland China in the post-Suharto era. In terms of affect, after decades of forced assimilation and feeling like they do not belong in Indonesia, many find comfort and belonging in once again expressing themselves as 'Chinese.' This is especially the case with older *totok* Chinese Indonesians (pre-1965 generation), most of whom experienced Chinese education and felt deeply embittered by the 'erasure' of Chinese identity and culture during the New Order (Sai, 2010). For these ethnic Chinese, the rise of China as a global power rouses a sense of ethnic pride and legitimation.

From a much more practical perspective, the rise of China presents an unprecedented opportunity for Chinese Indonesians to act as intermediaries in (mainly commercial) dealings between Indonesia and China. A central assumption here is that a shared Chinese ethnicity, along with the ability to speak Mandarin will give ethnic Chinese persons an

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<sup>3</sup> <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/07/04/striving-for-safety/> (accessed 29 February 2016).

advantage in forging *guanxi* (kin/network-based preferential relationship) with business counterparts in Mainland China or other Chinese communities worldwide. For younger Chinese Indonesians, the desire to keep up and ride on the wave of China's rise is the main motivation for learning Mandarin and maintaining an active interest in developments in Mainland China. Indeed, this is a major factor why, over the last two decades, we have seen a sharp rise in the uptake of Mandarin language learning among the worldwide ethnic Chinese population, and China is fast becoming one of the top destinations for higher education for international students alongside traditional receiving countries such as the US, UK and Australia (Setijadi, 2013).

At the same time, the bilateral relationship between China and Indonesia has blossomed over the last fifteen years. This is evident in the establishment of the Sino-Indonesian strategic partnership in 2005, and the recent signing of Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) between the two countries for further Chinese foreign direct investment in Indonesia as part of the One Belt One Road and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road Economic Belt (popularly known as 'New Maritime Silk Road') visions announced as part of Chinese President Xi Jinping's ambitious expansion plans.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Xi Jinping announced this New Maritime Silk Road plan during his state visit to Jakarta in October 2013 is a reflection of how important Indonesia is to China's long-term strategy in the Asian region.

According to data from the Trade Ministry, Indonesia had a US\$10 billion trade deficit with China in 2015. Chinese investment is very important, particularly for the building of infrastructure and maritime projects desperately needed to fulfil President Jokowi's vision of Indonesia as a global 'maritime fulcrum'.<sup>5</sup> This is quite a remarkable development, especially if we remember the diplomatic freeze between China and Indonesia from 1967 to 1990 following allegations of China's involvement in the alleged abortive communist coup of 30 September 1965 which sparked strong anti-communist and anti-China discourses in Indonesia. Today, the potential for Chinese Indonesians to act as trade, cultural and linguistic intermediaries is well understood, not just by Chinese Indonesians themselves but also by both the PRC and Indonesian governments.

Historically, appealing to, and garnering support from, ethnic Chinese communities and diaspora abroad has been an important part of the Chinese state's foreign policy. Since 1989, China has actively pursued policies to connect and harness overseas Chinese's economic and political potential by using tools that include overseas recruitment, investment incentive programmes, and government entities such as the Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress (OCAC) and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (OCAO) that deal specifically with overseas Chinese populations.

Furthermore, Beijing has attempted to exert strategic influence on Chinese communities worldwide through soft-power inducements like scholarships, 'ancestral village' tourism, sponsorship of ethnic Chinese cultural events, and the sending of volunteer Mandarin

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303722604579112940343117368> (accessed 29 February 2016); <http://www.bsd-kadin.org/news/news-detail/id/86> (accessed 29 February 2016).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/11/20/indonesia-eyeing-more-investment-china.html> (accessed 29 February 2016); <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/indonesia-china-seal-maritime-partnership/> (accessed 29 February 2016).

language teachers abroad through government institutions such as the Confucius Institutes worldwide. The result has been the growing importance of overseas Chinese as a significant economic and political force for China (Liu, 2011). The implications for both multi-generational ethnic Chinese who have acculturated into their host countries or new migrant Chinese nationals living abroad are significant but not well understood.

What is clear is the narrative projected by Beijing of the role it envisions for ethnic Chinese communities worldwide. In speeches given to various Chinese communities around the world over the last few years, Xi Jinping repeatedly stressed the importance of overseas Chinese as a ‘bridge’ that could strengthen the relationship between China and their ‘host’ countries.<sup>6</sup> The same official line is echoed by Chinese officials, such as happened in April 2012, when OCAO Beijing director Li Yinze gave a speech at the China Chamber of Commerce in Jakarta, urging young Chinese Indonesians to learn Mandarin ‘in order to strengthen their identification with the Chinese nation.’ More strongly, in a speech to INTI made in September 2015, OCAO chairman Qiu Yuanping said that ‘the ancestral land (of the Chinese) will never forget the major contribution of the *huaqiao huaren* overseas. China will always be the strong backer of the people of Chinese descent overseas.’<sup>7</sup>

### **CHINESE INDONESIANS AS A ‘BRIDGE’?**

Thus far, Chinese Indonesian organisations and prominent individuals have been actively involved in trade and cultural exchanges between Indonesia and China. Socio-cultural Chinese Indonesian organizations such as INTI and PSMTI as well as smaller clan and religious organizations hold regular cultural and philanthropic events (particularly around the time of Chinese New Year) that are often done in cooperation with the Chinese embassy in Jakarta, or at least attended by embassy officials.

In commerce, Chinese Indonesian entrepreneurs and businesses are instrumental players in Sino-Indonesian trade relations, particularly in forging business-to-business (B2B) relations. Realizing the importance of personal connections and referrals in conducting business with China, many Chinese Indonesian entrepreneurs join associations such as Chinese Indonesian Entrepreneur Association (*Perhimpunan Pengusaha Tionghoa Indonesia* or PERPIT), Indonesian Chinese Entrepreneur Community (*Perkumpulan Masyarakat dan Pengusaha Tionghoa Indonesia* or PERMIT), and Indonesia-China Business Council (ICBC) in order to gain access to these associations’ networks with current and potential Chinese investors and/or business partners.

Indeed, these associations and their members often act as the first point of contact for Chinese businesses and trade delegations when they look for business and investment opportunities in Indonesia. Because of this, they are careful to maintain cordial relations with the PRC Embassy and Consulates in Indonesia, as well as with officials from the relevant state institutions in China.

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[http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/xjpfwvnymlxycx21apec\\_665682/t1085195.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwvnymlxycx21apec_665682/t1085195.shtml)  
(accessed 1 March 2016).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/why-have-two-world-chinese-entrepreneur-conferences>  
(accessed 1 March 2016).

Many of the executive members and elders of these associations are (older) established ethnic Chinese business tycoons with strong business connections such as Dato Sri Tahir and Kiki Barki. These tycoons are usually also elders in larger organizations such as INTI, as well as in clan and region-based groups, which means that they are influential players in both Chinese Indonesian identity politics and Sino-Indonesian relations. Outside of organised groups, it is well known that most, if not all, prominent Chinese Indonesian business tycoons have commercial links and investments in China.

In the last few years, these Chinese Indonesian entrepreneur associations have been connecting more with the global network of overseas Chinese entrepreneurs, so much so that in September 2015, PERPIT hosted the World Chinese Entrepreneurs Conference (WCEC) in Bali. Bringing the WCEC gathering to Indonesia is a big feat for PERPIT, not only because it promotes investments and trade in Indonesia, but also because it demonstrates that Chinese Indonesian business leaders are prominent and influential in the global overseas Chinese business scene.

It can be seen from these developments that the *totok* Chinese business community is certainly actively creating a strategic ‘bridging’ role for themselves in Sino-Indonesian relations, at least in the commercial sector.

### **THE PARADOX OF SINIFICATION**

Amidst all these developments however, many within the Chinese Indonesian community are getting increasingly worried about the growing confidence of the *totok* business elite in displaying their Chineseness and closeness with China. This is especially true among *peranakan* Chinese, the vast majority of whom do not speak Mandarin or other Chinese languages. Language is a major issue here, where non-Mandarin speaking Chinese Indonesians are uncomfortable with the fact that some Chinese Indonesian public events are now done bilingually in Indonesian and Mandarin. Keeping in mind that the majority of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia originally spoke Hokkien, Hakka or Teochew, the growing dominance of Mandarin reflects the general trend that – like in other Chinese communities around the world – many Chinese Indonesians are orientating themselves more to a Mainland Chinese version of Chineseness.

Perhaps more importantly, there are worries about a potential backlash to ‘overt’ public displays of Chinese culture, the use of Mandarin, and closeness to China. The fact that such worries exist indicates that there are still negative ideological connotations in post-Suharto Indonesia about China and the loyalty of Chinese Indonesians.

Indeed, even now, there are frequent attacks in the media by various right-wing and Islamist *pribumi* groups that accuse Chinese Indonesian businessmen and politicians of being China’s puppets in Indonesia.<sup>8</sup> Attacks on Jakarta Governor Ahok are often based on his

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nahimunkar.com/kelakuan-orang-cina-indonesia-anda-mau-tahu/> (accessed 1 March 2016).



Chinese ethnicity, and even Jokowi was accused of being Chinese in a smear campaign during the 2014 Presidential race.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, while most can agree that good trade relations between China and Indonesia are needed, the Jokowi administration's seeming closeness to China is starting to draw widespread criticisms. One case in point is the on-going controversy surrounding the multi-billion dollar tender for the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project that was – after a confusing backflip by the Indonesian government – eventually awarded to China instead of Japan in October 2015.<sup>10</sup> The opaque handling of the tender process aroused suspicions that Jokowi's administration – particularly Minister of State-Owned Businesses Rini Soemarno – is strongly biased towards, and acting for the interests of, Chinese businesses.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, criticisms surrounding the awarding of power plant-building contracts to a Chinese consortium, and panic over the supposed 'flood' of Chinese labourers into Indonesia to work on infrastructure and manufacturing projects also reflect persisting suspicions over China's influence in Indonesia.<sup>12</sup>

While anti-China discourses do not necessarily cause, or go hand-in-hand with, negative perceptions of Chinese Indonesians, history has shown that – for better or worse – perceptions of China in Indonesia has inevitably affected Chinese Indonesians. In the meantime, for Chinese Indonesians who are worried that an overt display of Chineseness might perpetuate negative stereotypes of foreignness and disloyalty, the fear of a *pribumi* 'backlash' is real.

Clearly, the trend towards Sinification and closer ties with China has created gaps among Chinese Indonesians – between the *totok* and *peranakan* groups, Mandarin and non-Mandarin speakers, the business elite and others, and the older and younger generations. If at the beginning of the post-Suharto era, Chinese Indonesian organizations played a much greater advocacy role that represented most, if not all, Chinese Indonesians, nowadays they are dominated by business elites who possess both the capital and influence to put forward their own cultural and commercial agendas. Those outside of this exclusive group have expressed discontent over the direction of Chinese Indonesian identity politics, and these internal divisions may widen even further in the future.

Post-Suharto Chinese Indonesian identity politics has evolved over the last two decades, and will continue to adapt to changing socio-political climates that have to do with both

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.beritateratas.com/2016/01/ahok-cina-kafir-ahok-galak-tukang-gusur.html>; <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/07/04/striving-for-safety/> (accessed 1 March 2016).

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-30/indonesia-awards-major-rail-contract-to-china/6818082>; [http://www.wsj.com/articles/indonesia-to-break-ground-on-first-high-speed-railway-this-year-1443596942?mod=rss\\_Business](http://www.wsj.com/articles/indonesia-to-break-ground-on-first-high-speed-railway-this-year-1443596942?mod=rss_Business) (accessed 1 March 2016).

<sup>11</sup> <http://bisnis.liputan6.com/read/2339420/di-kabinet-kerja-menteri-rini-dikenal-paling-dekat-dengan-china>; <http://finance.detik.com/read/2015/09/17/073448/3021034/5/rini-soemarno-antar-3-bank-bumn-teken-utang-china-rp-42-triliun> (accessed 1 March 2016).

<sup>12</sup> <http://en.tempo.co/read/news/2016/01/13/241735595/Sofyan-Basir-PLN-CEO-Chinese-investors-today-are-different> (accessed 1 March 2016); <https://m.tempo.co/read/news/2015/08/31/173696600/jk-minta-menteri-tenaga-kerja-cegah-banjir-buruh-cina> (accessed 15 January 2016).

domestic politics and the rise of China in the region. For Chinese Indonesians, the challenge is to find a balance between freedom of expression, capitalising on their 'bridging' role in Sino-Indonesian relations, and managing their public image in a country that is ultimately still suspicious of their loyalty.

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