

ISSN 0219-3213

2017 no. 6

Trends in
Southeast Asia

OLD STEREOTYPES, NEW CONVICTIONS:
*PRIBUMI PERCEPTIONS OF ETHNIC
CHINESE IN INDONESIA TODAY*

JOHANES HERLIJANTO

Trends in Southeast Asia

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Published by: ISEAS Publishing
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
publish@iseas.edu.sg <http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Herlijanto, Johanes.

Old Stereotypes, New Convictions : Pribumi Perceptions of Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia Today.

(Trends in Southeast Asia, 0219-3213 ; TRS 6/17)

1. Chinese—Indonesia.
2. Indonesia—Ethnic relations.
- I. Title.

II. Series: Trends in Southeast Asia ; TRS 6/17.

DS501 I59T no.6 (2017) July 2017

ISBN 978-981-4786-34-8 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-4786-35-5 (e-book, PDF)

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Mainland Press Pte Ltd

FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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Old Stereotypes, New Convictions: *Pribumi* Perceptions of Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia Today

By Johanes Herlijanto

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Despite improvements in the position of ethnic Chinese in the *reformasi* era, critical and negative perceptions of them persist among prominent *pribumi* personalities, particularly in recent years.
- These include leaders of several Islamic organizations, nationalists who harbour suspicions about foreign powers, and some who were in mid-career and/or were well placed in the last years of the Suharto era. This latter group consists of retired senior military officers, senior scholars, as well as current and former senior government officials.
- The ethnic Chinese are often portrayed as outsiders who are already dominant economically, and who are trying to be politically dominant as well. Furthermore, it is often claimed that ethnic Chinese tend to be loyal towards China.
- At the same time, there are others, including politicians affiliated with pro-government political parties, high-ranking officials, leaders of NGOs sympathetic to President Jokowi, as well as advocates of multiculturalism (many of whom are scholars and Muslim leaders), who believe that Chinese Indonesians are first and foremost Indonesians. The evidence they cite to support this belief varies, from past heroic actions by ethnic Chinese to the identity constructs of Chinese Indonesians, which is usually based on Indonesia or some Indonesian region.

Old Stereotypes, New Convictions: *Pribumi* Perceptions of Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia Today

By Johanes Herlijanto¹

INTRODUCTION

On 30 July 2016, a riot took place in Tanjung Balai, a city in Indonesia's North Sumatra Province. It was incited by a protest from an ethnic Chinese woman, who felt that the sound from the loudspeaker of a nearby mosque was too loud and disturbing. Considering her protest to be harassment against their religious practice, Muslims from around the city gathered in front of the woman's house. Unable to attack the house, which was cordoned off by the security forces, the group targeted a number of Chinese and Buddhist temples, and shops, many of which belonged to ethnic Chinese Indonesians.

Leaders in faraway Jakarta responded to the incident in various ways. The general chairperson (Ketua Umum) of Muhammadiyah, one of the largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, saw the riot as the tip of a “social problem iceberg” caused by a deep socio-economic gap.² Similarly, the general chairperson of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), another one of the

¹ Johanes Herlijanto is a Visiting Fellow at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore.

² *Kompas*, “Ketua PP Muhammadiyah Sebut Kerusuhan Tanjungbalai Dinamika Bangsa Majemuk” [Chairperson of the Muhammadiyah’s Central Board Called the Riot as a Dynamic of a Diverse Nation], 4 August 2016 <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2016/08/04/15183251/ketua.pp.muhammadiyah.sebut.kerusuhan.tanjungbalai.dinamika.bangsa.majemuk?utm_source=WP&utm_medium=box&utm_campaign=Kknwp> (accessed 15 September 2016).

biggest Islamic organizations in the country, pointed to the intellectual, economic, and social gaps within society as the root of the problem.³ But a more straightforward opinion came from Lieutenant General (Retired) Suryo Prabowo, who asserted that the riot was triggered by the arrogant behaviour of the ethnic Chinese, who dominate the middle and upper middle business sectors, including the property business.⁴ His assertion indicates that after two decades of *reformasi*, negative views of ethnic Chinese persist among important members of the *pribumi* elite, and the public expression of this has begun taking place more openly in recent years.

This article studies this apparent turnaround in Indonesian public discourse, especially among the *pribumi* elite eighteen years after the demise of the New Order regime. Inherited from the colonial era, the term “*pribumi*” refers to hundreds of different ethnic groups whom the Dutch administration subsumed into one category, essentially “the natives”. The *pribumi* identity became a significant issue in the beginning of the twentieth century when the Indonesian nation was still being constructed. While some of the founding fathers of the nation wished to build a nation to include all who lived in the Netherlands Indies, many others thought that the nation should be exclusively for the *pribumi*.⁵

By the term “elite”, this article refers to the groups of people whom sociologist Tom Bottomore calls the “political class”, that is, “all those

³ Danang Prabowo, “Ketum PBNU: Kesenjangan Picu Kerusuhan di Tanjung Balai” [General Chairperson of NU Central Board: Social Gap Triggered the Riot at Tanjung Balai], *Sindonews*, 31 July 2016 <<http://nasional.sindonews.com/read/1127568/14/ketum-pbnu-kesenjangan-picu-kerusuhan-di-tanjung-balai-1469900302>> (accessed 15 September 2016).

⁴ Nusanews, “Suryo Prabowo: Pembakaran Vihara di Tanjungbalai dipicu Oleh Perilaku Etnis China yang Arogan, Tidak Adaptif” [Surya Prabowo: Arson Attack on Temples in Tanjung Balai Was Triggered by the Ethnic Chinese’s Arrogant and Unadaptable Attitudes], 2 August 2016 <<http://www.nusanews.com/2016/08/suryo-prabowo-pembakaran-vihara-di.html>> (accessed 15 September 2016).

⁵ Robert E. Elson, *The Idea of Indonesia: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 78.

groups which exercise political power or influence, and are directly engaged in struggles for political leadership”⁶. In a study conducted in Jakarta between January and June 2016, I had the opportunity to speak with over thirty people, whom I selected based on their current or former position in the military, government and non-government institutions. The majority of these people belong to the aforementioned “political class”. They include current and former high-ranking government officials, active and retired senior military officers, senior politicians, leaders of Muslim organizations, leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as prominent scholars and public intellectuals. However, not all the above groups seek a formal position in politics. A number of them only wish to participate more actively in what they view as a struggle for a better Indonesia, either by trying to influence policy-making, or by supporting politicians who in their view may better represent them. Yet they actively voice their opinion in the media as well as in public meetings, and hence, may influence a wider segment of Indonesian society. How do they perceive the ethnic Chinese, and why? How varied are these perceptions among the different elite groups?

It is this list of questions that the article will deal with, beginning with an overview of the position of the ethnic Chinese since the demise of the New Order regime. This is followed by a discussion of the *pribumi* elite groups who have negative perceptions of the ethnic Chinese. The third section will be devoted to the groups who retain a more accommodating and inclusive view of the ethnic Chinese.

THE CHANGING POSITION OF THE ETHNIC CHINESE

During the New Order era that spanned from 1967 to 1998, the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia received unequal treatment from the government. They became “one of the four major ‘Others’ of the New Order Self”,

⁶ Tom Bottomore, *Elite and Society* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 7–8.

together with Communism, fundamentalist Islam, and the West.⁷ The three pillars of Chinese culture, that is, Chinese schools, mass media, and organizations, were not allowed to exist.⁸ The ethnic Chinese were also dissuaded by the New Order state from participating in politics, and were instead encouraged to pursue business endeavours.

The plight of the Chinese Indonesians began to improve after Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) became the president of Indonesia in 1999. In 2000, President Wahid released a Presidential Decree (Number 6/2000), giving freedom to Chinese Indonesians to conduct their own cultural and religious activities. Since then, public appearance of various symbols of Chinese culture, such as lion dance performances, dragon dance performances, red lanterns, and Chinese traditional attire, have become commonplace in urban centres, especially during Chinese New Year (Imlek).⁹ Furthermore, in 2002, President Megawati announced that Chinese New Year would be a public holiday. A decade later, President Yudhoyono released a presidential decision that requires all government officials to use the term *Tiongkok* to refer to China, and *Tionghoa* to refer to the ethnic Chinese.

Throughout the two decades of the *reformasi* era, Chinese Indonesians have eagerly participated in the country's politics. Their political participation was initially conducted as a response to the May 1998 riots that victimized Chinese Indonesians. Seeking to take the necessary steps to prevent such an event from happening again, some Chinese Indonesians established organizations to promote an awareness of the need for ethnic

⁷ Ariel Heryanto, "Ethnic Identity and Erasure: Chinese Indonesians in Public Culture", in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand*, edited by Joel S. Kahn (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), p. 97.

⁸ Leo Suryadinata, "Chinese Indonesians in an Era of Globalization: Some Major Characteristics", in *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia*, edited by Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), p. 2.

⁹ For an in-depth discussion on this phenomenon, see C.Y. Hoon, *Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia: Culture, Politics, and Media* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2008).

Chinese to have a better image and to be fully recognized as part of Indonesian society.¹⁰ Political participation was seen as one of the means to achieve this ideal. Such awareness has indeed become widespread, as evidenced by the increasing number of Chinese Indonesians who have become politicians. Many have been successful, securing seats in the House of Representatives, either at the national or regional (local) level.¹¹ Some have even become cabinet ministers, governors or vice governors, heads of a regency or municipality, or hold other influential positions. Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), the former governor of Jakarta, and Harry Tanoeesoedibjo, a media tycoon who recently established the Partai Persatuan Indonesia (Perindo, or Indonesian United Party), are two of the most remarkable Chinese Indonesian political figures today. Ahok in particular became very popular after he was elected vice-governor of Jakarta in 2012. Although he was defeated when contesting the 2017 gubernatorial election, his popularity continues today.

PERSISTENT SENTIMENTS AGAINST THE ETHNIC CHINESE

Despite the changed position of the ethnic Chinese in the *reformasi* era, critical and negative perceptions of them persist in Indonesian society. This is most vocally obvious among certain groups of the *pribumi* elite, particularly in recent years. These include leaders of Islamic organizations, nationalists suspicious of foreign powers, and individuals who had been in the mid-career or held high positions in the waning years of the Suharto era. This last group includes retired senior military officers, senior scholars, as well as current and former senior government officials. Some members of these groups are disappointed with the administration of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in one way or another.

¹⁰ The most prominent examples of these are the Chinese Indonesians Association (Perhimpunan INTI) and the Indonesian Chinese Surnames Association (PSMTI).

¹¹ For a list of the ethnic Chinese who have become members of parliament at the national level since 1999 onwards, see *China Town*, June 2014, p. 15.

The sentiments found among the above groups are to a certain extent based on stereotypes that have been bandied about since before the New Order. These stereotypes include the idea that the descendants of migrants — whose loyalty to Indonesia is considered questionable — dominate the economy despite being the minority.¹² To a certain extent, these stereotypes have become the lens through which many interpret the activities of Chinese Indonesians. This section specifically discusses three of these perceptions, namely, ethnic Chinese as outsiders; ethnic Chinese have dominated the Indonesian economy and are trying to dominate Indonesian politics; and finally, ethnic Chinese are loyal to China. These perceptions act as the backbone for the re-emerging anti-Chinese sentiments among the *pribumi* elite.

Economic and Political Dominance

The view that Chinese Indonesians are outsiders trying to dominate the *pribumi* is commonly held among the *pribumi* elite discussed in this section. As Professor Bachtiar (pseudonym), a senior expert in Indonesian politics and security, explained in an interview, it is differences in ethnicity, culture, and religion which have made *pribumi* Indonesians believe that the Chinese are outsiders and do not belong to the Indonesian nation.¹³

Members of the *pribumi* elite articulate this view in various ways. An example is provided by Bambang Semit, a Javanese lawyer and the president of a newly founded political party, the Partai Pribumi. When asked what he thought of Ahok, he pointed out that while the ethnic Chinese governor was a good administrator, “He was not one of my nation (*bukan bangsa saya*).”¹⁴ As such he refused to support Ahok.

¹² Charles A. Coppel, *Indonesian Chinese in Crisis* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 5–29.

¹³ Interview with Prof Bachtiar, a senior expert in Indonesian politics and security, Jakarta, Indonesia, 29 February 2016.

¹⁴ Interview with Bambang Semit, Jakarta, Indonesia, 10 May 2016.

The sentiment is based on the idea that the nation should only be composed of natives of the Indonesian archipelago. This notion became popular among Indonesian nationalists in the first decades of the twentieth century when the country was still a Dutch colony.¹⁵ It was the colonial government that subsumed the ethnic Chinese and other Asian migrants into the “Foreign Orientals” category — a category which emphasized their foreignness.¹⁶ Together with the Eurasians (popularly known as the “Indo”), these “Foreign Orientals” were considered ineligible to become Indonesians by the majority of Indonesian nationalist leaders. Along with the ethnic Chinese, the Hadramis, a group of migrants from southern Arabia, were also viewed as outsiders, despite sharing the same religion as the majority of the *pribumi* Indonesians.¹⁷ These “Foreign Orientals” people, including the Hadramis, were not accorded full membership in the nationalist organization founded by the *pribumi* in those decades.¹⁸ The Hadramis were finally accepted as Indonesian nationals by the *pribumi* nationalists several years before independence, following efforts by them to redefine themselves as Indonesians.¹⁹

Today, roughly a century after the birth of Indonesia, the view that the descendants of those “Foreign Orientals” are outsiders persists among certain members of the Indonesian elite. Bambang Semit’s understanding of the ethnic Arabs substantiates this view.

I regard the Arabs in the same way in which I regard the Chinese.
The reason why I do not strongly oppose them at the moment

¹⁵ Elson, *The Idea of Indonesia*.

¹⁶ Charles A. Coppel, “The Indonesian Chinese: ‘Foreign Orientals,’ Netherlands Subjects, and Indonesian Citizens”, in *Law and the Chinese in Southeast Asia*, edited by M. Barry Hooker (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), p. 133.

¹⁷ Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900–1942* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 139.

¹⁸ Elson, *The Idea of Indonesia*, p. 78.

¹⁹ Mobini-Khesheh, *The Hadrami Awakening*, p. 141.

is because they are not strong enough. If they one day become strong and make an attempt to dominate the *pribumi*, I will go against them as well.²⁰

This view that Arab Indonesians are outsiders has been expressed by someone like Bambang Semit, to whom “*pribumi* nationalism” carries more weight than his religious identity. It is more striking when someone like Dr Mahmud Abdullah (pseudonym), a top leader of a large mainstream Islamic organization, expresses a similar opinion. Born and raised in a city in Central Java, Dr Abdullah received his elementary education in a *madrasah*, a modern Islamic educational institution that provides instructions in general education as well as in the religious sciences.²¹ In an interview, Dr Abdullah pointed out that Arabs had received a warmer welcome from the *pribumi* Indonesians despite the fact that “the Arabs are also “foreigners” (Indonesian: *asing*). They also feel that they are superior, and (they) are as exclusive as the Chinese”.²² While the above statement seemed uttered to show the “acceptability” of the Arabs among the *pribumi* Muslims, it nevertheless exemplifies that the label *asing* still applies to them.

The acceptability of the Arabs, who share the same religion with the majority of Indonesians, may lead one to argue that the negative sentiments among the *pribumi* against people regarded as “foreigners” may be mitigated if these “foreigners” shared the same religion as the *pribumi*. This argument has been voiced by certain Muslim Chinese leaders, such as Junus Jahja, since the New Order era.²³ However, quite

²⁰ Interview with Bambang Semit, Jakarta, Indonesia, 10 May 2016.

²¹ Azyumardi Azra, Dina Afrianty and Robert W. Hefner, “Pesantren and Madrasa: Muslim Schools and National Ideals in Indonesia”, in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, edited by Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 176.

²² An interview with Dr Mahmud Abdullah (pseudonym), a top leader of a large Islamic organization, Jakarta, Indonesia, 11 April 2016.

²³ See Junus Jahja, *Islam di Mata WNI* (Jakarta: Yayasan Haji Karim Oey, 1993), pp. 65–70.

a few members of the *pribumi* elite retain their negative sentiments even against ethnic Chinese who have converted to Islam. By way of example, Bambang Semit commented that, “The Chinese are the same, whichever their religious belief is. The Muslim Chinese will emphasize their ethnicity rather than their religion”. Similarly, the aforementioned leader of the Muslim organization argues that the tendency among Chinese Muslims to establish ethnicity-based Muslim organizations, such as the Association of Indonesian Chinese Muslim (PITI), has made the Muslim *pribumi* hesitant about accepting them.²⁴

Other than being regarded as outsiders (*asing*), the ethnic Chinese are also viewed by members of the *pribumi* elites as harbouring the ambition to dominate others. In their view, this trait may be traced back to the Yuan Dynasty which invaded Singasari, a Javanese kingdom, in the last decade of the thirteenth century. The fact that the invasion was conducted by the Mongols does not stop the invasion from becoming one of the important arguments for the “China threat”, especially since the beginning of the New Order era.²⁵ True, since about a decade ago, the narrative of the Chinese invasion of Java has been contested by the story of Admiral Zheng He, a Ming Dynasty Muslim eunuch who visited Java during his global expeditions to fulfil what some scholars regard as a peaceful mission. Be that as it may, the Yuan incursion into Java persists as an element among the *pribumi* elite.

Some claim that the wish to dominate others is found among ethnic Chinese today. Dr Sri Bintang Pamungkas, a senior academic teaching at the University of Indonesia, is one of those who hold that view. Dr Sri Bintang is a rather conventional modernist Muslim who was among those appointed to the planning committee of the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI) when the organization was founded in December 1990.²⁶ He is known for his courage in criticizing President

²⁴ Interview with Ahmad Wijaya, Jakarta, Indonesia, 12 May 2016.

²⁵ Rizal Sukma, *Indonesia and China: the Politics of Troubled Relationship* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 52.

²⁶ Robert Hefner, “Islamization and Democratization in Indonesia”, in *Islam in an Era of Nation-State: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*, edited by Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvath (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), p. 99.

Suharto when he was still the most powerful person in the country. In May 1996, Sri Bintang founded the Indonesian Democratic United Party (PUDI). He is still politically active now. Besides sharing his ideas with many senior members of the elite (including former top military officers and government officials) via various kinds of electronic messages, he also organizes a weekly forum called Rakyat Bergerak (People in Motion). It was during a session at this forum that Dr Sri Bintang expressed his suspicions of the ethnic Chinese. He equated them to a tenant who after some time manages to control the entire house and make the owner of the house the tenant instead.²⁷

The economy is one of the areas considered to be dominated by ethnic Chinese. This belief has been popular in Indonesian society for more than half a century. In a talk given in Tokyo in 1968, President Suharto said that the Chinese Indonesians controlled about 70 per cent of the country's economy.²⁸ While the above number may have been exaggerated, ethnic Chinese economic dominance during the New Order period was not altogether a myth. Writing in 1986, Richard Robison revealed how the ethnic Chinese share of domestic investment in 1972 was 9 per cent higher than the *pribumi* share, and the state credit that had gone to them constituted 80 per cent of the total domestic credit allocations that year.²⁹ The above claims appeared in *Tempo* magazine and were generally accepted as being close to the truth.³⁰ The claim that ethnic Chinese own a high percentage of the Indonesian economy became popular again in the second half of the 1990s, following a statement made by Michael Backman, an executive officer with the East Asia Analytical Unit of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and

²⁷ The view was expressed in a session of the "Rakyat Bergerak" forum, Jakarta 2 May 2016.

²⁸ Leo Suryadinata, *Pribumi Indonesians, the Chinese Minority, and China*, Third Edition (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1992), p. 44.

²⁹ Richard Robison, *Indonesia: the Rise of Capital* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986) p. 273.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 274.

Trade in Canberra.³¹ In that statement, ethnic Chinese were said to control approximately 73 per cent of firms listed by market capitalization.³² For sociologist George Aditjondro, the statement did not correctly portray what was really going on. According to him, instead of being controlled by Chinese Indonesians, 70 per cent of the Indonesian economy during the New Order period were in the hands of a handful of business families where the distinction of Chinese and non-Chinese have now blurred into a web of overlapping shareholder and directorships.³³ Nevertheless, two decades later, the “myth of ethnic Chinese economic domination” is still widespread among elite Indonesians. Consider the following statement made by Professor Bachtiar, the senior expert in Indonesian politics and security whom I quoted earlier,

Let’s talk about data. Less than 1 per cent of the Indonesian people own about 40 to 50 per cent of this country’s prosperity. This less than 1 per cent group is absolutely the Indonesian Chinese. Who are the wealthy Indonesians with big influence? All skyscraper buildings here belong to them. All educated people know this fact.³⁴

Likewise, Sri Bintang believes that Chinese Indonesians control vast tracts of land in many cities. He believes that a large area of land in Bandung (West Java’s provincial capital) for instance, is in the hands of one Chinese Indonesian family. In Sri Bintang’s view, Cirebon would become their next target. He regards the plan made by some Chinese tycoons to construct ports and carry out several other infrastructure projects in Cirebon as worrisome, because this would tighten the ethnic Chinese grip on the city.³⁵

³¹ George Aditjondro, “Indonesia: the Myth of Chinese Domination”, *Jakarta Post*, 14 August 1998.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Interview with Prof Bachtiar, Jakarta, Indonesia, 29 February 2016.

³⁵ Interview with Sri Bintang Pamungkas, Jakarta, Indonesia, 2 May 2016.

The property business is another sector considered to be in the hands of the ethnic Chinese. The view is compounded by the fact that many high-profile developments are owned, or at least managed, by ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs. Ciputra (who established Ciputra group), Anton Haliman (founder of Agung Podomoro group), A Guan (owner of Agung Sedayu group), and Soetjipto Nagaria (who founded Summarecon Agung), are some examples of these entrepreneurs.³⁶ Conglomerates owned by the ethnic Chinese developed new towns such as Bumi Serpong Damai and Lippo Karawaci in Tangerang, which are inhabited mostly by ethnic Chinese.³⁷ In Northeast Jakarta, Kelapa Gading, an entrepreneurial city which expresses an image of a Chinatown, is another case in point.³⁸ In recent years, particularly in the last two, the existence of these new Chinatowns, together with the Chinese Indonesian developers who produced them, have strengthened *pribumi* elite prejudices against ethnic Chinese.

The perception of ethnic Chinese economic supremacy, a perception often fuelled by the presence of many ethnic Chinese at the top of the list of the wealthiest people in the country,³⁹ has powered resentment among some members of the *pribumi* elite. Such resentment was expressed, among others, by Nur Lapong, a Muslim leader closely affiliated with Syarikat Islam, a Muslim organization whose existence goes back to the first decade of the twentieth century. Lapong was one of the supporters of Jokowi in the 2014 presidential election. However, he was later disappointed with the president, which in his view, had not done much

³⁶ Abidin Kusno, *Visual Cultures of the Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 141.

³⁷ Harald Leisch, “Perception and the Use of Space by Ethnic Chinese in Jakarta”, in *Urban Ethnic Encounters: the Spatial Consequences*, edited by Aygen Erdentug and Freek Columbjijn (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 105–106.

³⁸ Evawani Ellisa, “The Entrepreneurial City of Kelapa Gading, Jakarta”, *Journal of Urbanism* 7, no. 2 (2014): 15–19.

³⁹ See, for example, <<http://www.globeasia.com/cover-story/150-richest-indonesians/>> (accessed 19 June 2017).

to reduce the ethnic imbalance in the Indonesian economy. “How can a minority group, which constitutes no more than 7 per cent of the Indonesian population, control 80 per cent of the country’s economy?”, he rhetorically asked in a conversation with this author.⁴⁰

The resentment against ethnic economic dominance is often conflated with the suspicion that ethnic Chinese businessmen often conduct their business unfairly. Such a perception has its roots in the old stereotype that regards the ethnic Chinese as “cunning”. Today, the term “black conglomerates” is often used to refer to Chinese tycoons who are considered exploitative.⁴¹ As declared by Ahmad Wijaya, it is these “black conglomerates” whom he and other members of the *pribumi* elite are resisting. In an interview, he declared, “Please note that we do not fight against the Chinese in general. There are many of our ethnic Chinese brothers and sisters who wish to live side by side with us peacefully. We are fine with them. But the black conglomerates! They exploit our economy, our resources.”

In Wijaya’s statement, a line is drawn between those who are “good Chinese Indonesians” and those who are “bad”. Ethnic Chinese tycoons are usually subsumed under the bad category while middle- and lower-class Chinese Indonesians are often considered “good”. This latter group of people is said to “have already blended in and become one soul (*bersenyawa*) with the local society and culture in Indonesia”.⁴²

The belief that many ethnic Chinese are imbued with the spirit of nationalism is held by members of the *pribumi* elite. According to Dr Mahmud Abdullah, among the good and nationalistic Chinese are the politician Alvin Lie, former minister Kwik Kian Gie, former minister Mari

⁴⁰ Conversation with Nur Lapong, Jakarta, Indonesia, 28 April 2016.

⁴¹ In Bahasa Indonesia, the term conglomerate refers to tycoons who own a corporation or rather than the corporation itself. See <<http://kbbi.web.id/konglomerat>> (accessed 17 November 2016).

⁴² Interview with Mr Wibisono (pseudonym), an executive director of an independent think-tank, Jakarta, Indonesia, 14 January 2016.

Pangestu, and the entrepreneur Sofjan Wanandi.⁴³ However, Dr Abdullah also believes that the existence of the Chinese “black conglomerates” has a negative impact because it has made many of the *pribumi* hesitate to completely accept the good and patriotic Chinese Indonesians.⁴⁴ As such, the *pribumi* are encouraged to direct their resentment against “bad” ethnic Chinese only. Sri Bintang, who frequently shows his respect to Kwik Kian Gie and regards him as a good nationalistic ethnic Chinese, also holds a similar view. When a member of his forum shouted that *pribumi* Indonesians should drive the ethnic Chinese out of the country (*usir Cina*), Sri Bintang corrected him by saying that only the ethnic Chinese “black mafia” should leave Indonesia.⁴⁵ By the term “black mafia”, Sri Bintang meant to indicate the existence of a network consisting not only of ethnic Chinese tycoons, but also ethnic Chinese politicians and other ethnic Chinese based in foreign countries, including China.

Indeed, the perception that ethnic Chinese businessmen have established networks at the national and international level is widespread among the *pribumi*. These networks are portrayed as a tool for dominating the world economy, including Indonesia. As a retired two-star military officer said in an interview, the ethnic Chinese have perhaps learned from the Jews, who according to the retired general, dominate the world economy. Similar to the Jews, the Chinese have spread to every part of the world to do exactly the same thing. “Eventually, the whole world’s

⁴³ An interview with a top leader of a large Islamic organization, Jakarta, Indonesia, 11 April 2016; Prior to the May 1998 riots, Sofjan Wanandi and his brother Jusuf Wanandi were considered bad Chinese. In addition to his disagreement with the government’s move in dealing with the economic crisis that hit the country since 1997, Wanandi was also alleged to have provided financial support to the banned political party, the People’s Democratic Party. Wanandi denied this allegation. See Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia, 1996–1999* (Singapore: Asian Studies Association of Australia), pp. 88–91.

⁴⁴ An interview with Dr Mahmud Abdullah, Jakarta, Indonesia, 11 April 2016.

⁴⁵ A statement by Sri Bintang Pamungkas in a “people in motion” forum of discussion, Jakarta, Indonesia, 25 April 2016.

economy will be in their [Chinese] hands, as has already happened in Indonesia”, opined the retired general.⁴⁶

Mr Wibisono (a pseudonym), an executive director of an independent think-tank, also expressed a similar opinion on the ethnic Chinese business networks. This fifty year-old Javanese argued that such networks exist at the local, national, regional, and international level. Prasetya Mulya, a management institute established in 1982 by a group of prominent Chinese Indonesian businessmen and intellectuals, is seen as an example of the existence of such networks at the national level during the New Order period. At the international level, the presence of such networks is exemplified by, among others things, the World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention, which in September 2015 organized its thirteenth conference in Bali. It was during last year’s conference that Mochtar Riady, the owner of the Lippo Group, invited Chinese entrepreneurs from around the world to invest their money in three different fields in Indonesia: property, infrastructure, and mining. While the invitation may have been motivated by the wish to boost Indonesian economic growth, it has nevertheless alarmed some *pribumi*. The executive director saw the invitation as a call for the Chinese to dominate the economy in these three fields.⁴⁷

Resentment against ethnic Chinese dominance in Indonesia is also expressed by leaders of the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), a Muslim group that has anti-Chinese leanings despite some of its members being Chinese Muslims. Ismail Yusanto, a top leader of the organization, views the ethnic Chinese as one of the global powers attempting to dominate Indonesia. Yusanto believes that the ethnic Chinese dominated the Indonesian economy even during the New Order period. However, in his view, it is the developments in recent years that have enabled the ethnic

⁴⁶ Interview with a retired two-star military officer, Jakarta, Indonesia, 28 January 2016.

⁴⁷ The view was expressed in a forum of discussion entitled as “The need for Indonesia to identify its geopolitical position”, Jakarta, Indonesia, 3 December 2015.

Chinese to tighten their grip on the country's economy. He observes that unlike in the past, this previously business-oriented minority group is now entering politics as well. The HTI leader also opines that the ethnic Chinese today are also more inclined to strengthen their links to China.

Yusanto's opinion is worth special attention because it raises concerns regarding the ethnic domination of not only the Indonesian economy, but also the country's politics. Such a concern is widespread among the *pribumi* elite. The concern was initially raised by local elites in the last decade, in response to the political participation of the ethnic Chinese, a phenomenon that began to take place in the early years of the *reformasi* period. As documented by M.D. La Ode, ethnic Malay community leaders in West Kalimantan regarded such political participation as an opportunity for the ethnic Chinese to establish their dominance not only in the economic sphere, but also in the political arena.⁴⁸ In this multi-ethnic province, there is a concern that Chinese politicians who acquire significant political positions might implement policies that only benefit the ethnic Chinese.⁴⁹ Today, the expression "after controlling Indonesian economy, the Chinese are now attempting to control the country's politics" is often heard among some members of the *pribumi* elite in Jakarta. Alongside this is the suspicion being aired that ethnic Chinese politicians will abuse his/her power for the benefit of his/her ethnic group.

Efforts to prevent an ethnic Chinese politician from holding a key position in Jakarta have actually been in place since 2012, when Ahok contested in Jakarta as Jokowi's vice-governor candidate. However, during that year, Ahok's ethnic background did not obstruct Jokowi from winning the election. Furthermore, many among the elite groups who

⁴⁸ M.D. La Ode, *Etnik Cina Indonesia dalam Politik: Politik Etnis Cina Singkawang dan Pontianak di Era Reformasi 1998–2008* [Indonesian Ethnic Chinese in Politics: The Politics of Ethnic Chinese in Singkawang and Pontianak in the Reformasi Era 1998–2000] (Jakarta: Pustaka Obor, 2012), p. 350.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

are against Ahok today supported him and Jokowi five years ago. Most importantly, Ahok enjoyed support from Prabowo Subianto, President Suharto's former son-in-law who founded the Gerindra (Great Indonesia Movement) Party. Ahok even joined Gerindra and only resigned from the party later in 2014, following his disagreement with the party's decision to return to non-direct gubernatorial elections.⁵⁰ Thus if in recent years, a number of Prabowo's supporters, either within or outside Gerindra, have become outspoken critics of Ahok's political behaviour and policies, this should be understood in the context of political rivalry rather than as a pure anti-Chinese sentiment.

Yet such criticisms may appear as a narrative against ethnic Chinese. A statement made public by Lieutenant General (retired) Johannes Suryo Prabowo provides an example of the narrative. A Catholic Madurese, Suryo Prabowo was a mentee of Prabowo Subianto when both were still in the National Military Academy. Forty years after, Suryo became a member of Prabowo's campaign team in his presidential race in 2014. Today, Suryo announced that although he did not wish to run for political position, he felt obliged to speak up if he saw something wrongful taking place in his country. Apparently, the general regarded Ahok's political manoeuvres as wrongful. In a Facebook post in March 2016, he asked people to remind the ethnic Chinese not to become "arrogant" (Indonesian: *sok jago*) when they become rulers or have close relationships with rulers. In his view, such a reminder is important for the sake of the good and poor Chinese because, "if there are those who come to slaughter and/or loot (the Chinese), these people cannot flee abroad". The message was undoubtedly meant to be delivered to Ahok. However, by addressing it to Chinese politicians or businessmen, the general made it an open statement directed at the ethnic Chinese in general.

⁵⁰ Rabu, "Ahok: Saya Sudah Resmi Keluar dari Gerindra" [Ahok: I Have Officially Resigned from Gerindra], *Megapolitan*, 10 September 2014 <<http://megapolitan.kompas.com/read/2014/09/10/15110301/Ahok.Saya.Sudah.Resmi.Keluar.dari.Gerindra>> (accessed 15 September 2016).

Before Suryo Prabowo posted the above statement, Nazaruddin Sjamsuddin, a former university professor who between 2001 and 2005 was the chairman of the General Election Commission (KPU), tweeted negatively about the ethnic Chinese as well.⁵¹ The message was posted in January 2016. While specifically addressed to Ahok, the message also addresses ethnic Chinese politician(s) and businessmen in general. They are seen as conspiring to dominate Indonesia. Sjamsuddin wrote that if Ahok were to become the governor for the second term in 2017, he is expected to implement a set of policies that may turn Jakarta into a city that is as expensive as Singapore. According to Sjamsuddin, since the majority of those with low incomes are *pribumi* Indonesians, the high cost of living, combined with the rising “land and building tax” (PBB) would force them to sell their houses and move to the suburbs. He concluded sarcastically:

But don’t worry, the *pribumi* will not find any difficulty in selling their houses, because our ethnic Chinese brothers and sisters would be happy to buy them. They can afford buying them because they have a higher income than the *pribumi*.

Sjamsuddin argued that if the above scenario takes place, Jakarta will become a predominantly Chinese city. Sjamsuddin also warned that if a similar phenomenon took place in other Indonesian cities as well, the country’s politics would be dominated by the “non-*pribumi*”. This warning once again reflects the fear of political and economic domination by ethnic Chinese among certain elite groups.

Relations between Ethnic Chinese and China

China has targeted Indonesia as their new land since long time ago. As such, the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia ... have begun

⁵¹ For the complete message see Era Muslim, “Prof. Nazaruddin: Jika Ahok Jadi Gubernur Lagi, Jakarta Akan Dikuasai Cina Dengan Menyingkirkan Pribumi”, 15 September 2016 <<https://www.eramuslim.com/berita/analisa/prof-nazaruddin-jika-ahok-jadi-gubernur-lagi-jakarta-akan-dikuasai-cina-dengan-menyingkirkan-pribumi.htm#.V6MGstJ97cs>> (accessed 15 September 2016).

to participate in “practice politics” by establishing (their own) political parties as well as by controlling other political parties with a purpose of making (an ethnic Chinese) an Indonesian president.⁵²

The above quote is a part of a statement made by Hatta Taliwang, the founding director of the Soekarno Hatta Political Economy Institute. Taliwang is a former politician affiliated with the National Mandate Party (PAN) from 1999 to 2010. He was one of the party’s representatives in the Indonesian Parliamentary House (DPR) between 1999 and 2002. In Taliwang’s view, ethnic Chinese political participation may create a problem because they may still remain loyal to their motherland. Furthermore, as he argued further, due to China’s adherence to *jus sanguinis* (a principle that determines someone’s citizenship based on the citizenship status of at least one of her/his parents), it regards the Chinese Indonesians as its subjects.⁵³

The above argument against ethnic Chinese political participation provides an example of how relations between ethnic Chinese and China have been viewed with suspicion by many among the *pribumi* elite. They are seen as people who remain faithful to China and who may help increase Chinese influence in Indonesia. This suspicious attitude is however not a new phenomenon. Doubts over ethnic Chinese loyalty to Indonesia were documented many decades ago. The dual citizenship issue that Taliwang raised did indeed exist in the history of Indonesian relations with China. But it was solved through an agreement between the governments of the two countries in 1955. Based on this agreement, Chinese Indonesians who chose to be Indonesian had to abandon their Chinese citizenship. Nevertheless, concerns that Chinese Indonesians

⁵² RMOL, “Hatta Taliwang: Warga Keturunan China Mau Kuasai Indonesia Lewat Kegiatan Politik”, 18 July 2016 <<http://www.rmol.co/read/2016/07/18/253475/Hatta-Taliwang:-Warga-Keturunan-China-Mau-Kuasai-Indonesia-Lewat-Kegiatan-Politik->>> (accessed 15 September 2016).

⁵³ Ibid.

may serve as a fifth column for China were still widespread in the 1960s, especially in the aftermath of the 1965 coup attempt by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which, according to the New Order government, received help from China.

This suspicious attitude has resurfaced, apparently as a response to the growing tendency among ethnic Chinese to build a career in politics. A question posed by a retired one-star military officer at a forum in which Sino-Indonesian relations became one of the themes may illustrate this attitude. The retired general asked if an ethnic Chinese politician could be trusted to become an Indonesian national leader. Roughly an hour later, at the luncheon served in the aftermath of the discussion, I approached the general, who commented by raising his question again, “What if they listen to orders from Beijing?”.⁵⁴

A suspicion similar to the one held by the above retired general was also expressed by a younger former high-ranking officer. When I asked him his opinion on ethnic Chinese politicians during an interview, this retired two-star military man answered the question by pointing to Ahok as an example. “I think once a Chinese is always a Chinese. I believe there are some in the backstage controlling him”, he uttered. After mentioning the name of some tycoons who might have sponsored Ahok, the retired general explained further, “this is part of China’s strategy to control the Indonesian economy. Some of the money (used to campaign in support of Ahok) might have come from China.”⁵⁵ Meanwhile a former parliamentary leader specifically raised his concern over land reclamation in Jakarta Bay, which according to the plan would be conducted by several leading property development companies. The senior politician suspected that the properties built in these man-made islands will be marketed in Mainland China. As a result, these islands were going to be dominated by Chinese migrants.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Personal conversation with a retired one-star general, Jakarta, Indonesia, 2 April 2016.

⁵⁵ Interview with a retired two-star military officer, Jakarta, Indonesia, 28 January 2016.

⁵⁶ Interview with a former leader of the Indonesian House of Representative, Jakarta, Indonesia, 25 June 2016.

A former ambassador was also suspicious and believed that due to its adherence to *jus sanguinis*, China might attempt to make use of the Chinese overseas for its own ends. He also predicts that sooner or later, there will be a conflict of interest between China and Indonesia. However, he declared that if ethnic Chinese consider themselves Indonesians, they would be on the Indonesian side, and would remain loyal to Indonesia.⁵⁷

The last statement made by the former ambassador is worth special attention because even though he retained suspicions towards China's possible intention to influence Chinese overseas, including ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, he is optimistic that at least a certain group of them would consider themselves Indonesians, and hence remain loyal to their country. How popular is this view among members of the *pribumi* elite? The next section will be devoted to a discussion on the above questions.

Inclusive View of the Ethnic Chinese

We do not live in pre-1998 Indonesian anymore. It's not our concern anymore. For me, it's not a concern at all. You cannot see China in that way (by problematizing the ethnic Chinese). There is no country without a Chinatown in this world. We need to embrace them, not seclude them.⁵⁸

The above statement was uttered by Mrs Ina Krisnamurthi, the Director for ASEAN Economic Cooperation of the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in response to a question I put to her regarding the recent political participation of Chinese Indonesians and the growing tendency of ethnic Chinese businessmen to do business with China. In the interview, Krisnamurthi and her two colleagues expressed concerns regarding China, which in her view behaved like a “confused dragon” (*naga yang sedang bingung*). Nevertheless, Krisnamurthi sees China and the Indonesian ethnic Chinese in two different ways. While her view of

⁵⁷ Interview with a former Indonesian ambassador to an Asian country, Jakarta, Indonesia, 17 January 2016.

⁵⁸ Interview with Mrs Ina Krisnamurthi, Jakarta, Indonesia, 1 March 2016.

China is rather critical, Krisnamurthi has no reservations about ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, including their celebration of Chinese identity and culture. She regards the ethnic Chinese as first and foremost Indonesians, just as herself, a Javanese who is also an Indonesian.

The way in which Ina Krisnamurthi perceives the ethnic Chinese provides an example of the sympathetic and inclusive view held by certain other elite members. These groups include politicians affiliated with pro-government political parties, high-ranking government officials, active senior military officers, leaders of NGOs sympathetic to Jokowi, as well as advocates of multiculturalism (many of whom are scholars and Muslim leaders). Most believe that Chinese Indonesians are first and foremost Indonesians. The evidence they cite to support this belief varies, from past heroic actions by ethnic Chinese, to the identity construction of the Chinese Indonesians, which is usually based on Indonesia or some region in Indonesia.

Ethnic Chinese participation in the struggle for Indonesia's independence during and after the Second World War is often cited as one of the legitimate reasons to acknowledge the "Indonesianess" of ethnic Chinese. A senior officer of the Indonesian Navy, for instance, regretted that many Indonesians often forget the role played by many different groups of Indonesians during the aforementioned struggle. He pointed to Admiral John Lie as an example. Admiral John Lie, a senior officer of the Indonesian Navy, was named a national hero by President Yudhoyono's administration, and is often mentioned by those who acknowledge the ethnic Chinese role in Indonesia's struggle for independence. He is seen as an example of an ethnic Chinese who loves Indonesia. An assertion from another senior military officer illustrates this. He believes that there are many other ethnic Chinese "fighters" (pejuang) besides the admiral and that "what matters is not a person's ethnic background, but how much he/she loves this country. One can say, 'I am a Chinese, but I love Indonesia'."⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Interview with a senior military officer who holds a high-ranking position in the Indonesian Council of Defense (Wantanas), Jakarta, Indonesia, 8 March 2016.

The view that the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia should be seen as Indonesians was also voiced by Guspiabri Sumowigeno, a young politician affiliated with the Nasional Democrat (Nasdem) Party. Educated in the University of Indonesia some twenty years ago, Guspi—as he likes to call himself—was an activist for the National Movement of the Indonesian Students (GMNI). Today, this social scientist is one of the chairpersons of the national committee (DPP) of his party. His perception of the ethnic Chinese are as follows:

If we observe how the acculturation and assimilation of the Chinese culture has been successful, we can be sure that the Chinese Indonesians are a people capable of becoming Indonesians. They construct their identity based on Indonesia, not based on any other country in the world. They are different from the Malaysian Chinese, who consider themselves as Chinese.... the empirical evidence that the process of acculturation and assimilation works well is the fact that we, Indonesians, have many ethnic Chinese heroes, particularly in the field of sports.⁶⁰

Likewise, Arif Nur Alam, a leader of a group of NGOs calling themselves “Koalisi Nawacita” (Nawacita Coalition), reported that most of the NGO activists welcome the participation of Chinese Indonesians. He and other NGO activists even “feel proud and are ready to give support if a Chinese Indonesian is willing to become a leader, because such participation will contribute to a better democratic atmosphere in Indonesia”.⁶¹

In a similar tone, Professor Dewi Fortuna Anwar, a prominent scholar on Indonesian politics, also views ethnic Chinese political participation positively. She regards their participation as the rightful implementation of the rights and responsibilities that each Indonesian has to support in the effort to develop the country. Professor Anwar highly values equal

⁶⁰ Interview with Guspiabri Sumowigeno, Jakarta, Indonesia, 24 March 2016.

⁶¹ Interview with Arif Nur Alam, Jakarta, Indonesia, 5 March 2016.

opportunity among Indonesians of any ethnic and religious background to gain political and economic access. She perceives the fear of Chinese economic and political domination as an unwise attitude. She encourages all Indonesians to improve their quality and professionalism, rather than being fearful of domination by a certain ethnic group in Indonesia.

However, some have concerns regarding the imbalance of economic capacity between ethnic Chinese and Indonesians from other ethnic backgrounds. Arif Nur Alam regarded the economic gap between the ethnic Chinese and the rest of Indonesians as worrisome because it could potentially increase the inter-ethnic segregation (*sekat-sekat*) in Indonesian society. Arif also criticized the growing tendency among Chinese Indonesian entrepreneurs to treat Indonesia only as a market for commodities produced in China.⁶² Similarly, Guspi believes that the practice of exporting raw materials from Indonesia to China, only to import them again as final products is regretful.

The young politician thinks that measures should be taken by the government to make sure that whenever possible, all production processes are based in Indonesia. He explained further that, “this would increase the participation of more groups in society, and hence reduce the concentration of economic resources in the hand of a certain group only.”⁶³

CONCLUSION

The article has discussed how diverse groups of Indonesian *pribumi* elite perceive Indoensia’s ethnic Chinese. The persistence of negative sentiments may be seen as a reproduction or continuation of old sentiments traceable back to the period before President Suharto came to power, to the heyday of the New Order regime. Resentment against ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs was considered in the early 1970s as the reaction

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Interview with Guspiabri Sumowigeno, Jakarta, Indonesia, 24 March 2016.

to how the group was perceived to have unfairly relied on connections with bureaucrats to expand their business, while in the 1990s, the same sentiments were seen to be a protest by Muslim Indonesians against their economic marginalization.⁶⁴ However, the awakening of these sentiments in recent years should also be understood as a response to several other phenomena. The success of the political participation of ethnic Chinese is one. In the past, Chinese Indonesians, as well as ethnic Chinese in some other Southeast Asian countries, were often seen to be “economically strong and indispensable but politically weak and vulnerable”.⁶⁵ Today, some Chinese Indonesian politicians have gained some political power, and this has become a source of concern for those who fear ethnic Chinese dominance in both the economic and political spheres.

In particular, there is fear that this dominance is imminent due to the rise of China. This stems from the age-old suspicion of conspiracies between China and Chinese communities, purportedly to dominate countries such as Indonesia.

It must be admitted that since all those interviewed for this study are from Jakarta and its suburbs, the local situation might have aggravated their perception of the ethnic Chinese. The timing would also have influenced sentiments. Ahok’s former position as the governor of Jakarta, and his run for a second term, was at the time of the study facing strong opposition from certain Muslim leaders who did not want Jakarta to be led by a non-Muslim leader.

It must be reiterated that *pribumi* elites do not hold uniform views about their ethnic Chinese counterparts. Some have an inclusive view of Chinese Indonesians and regard them first and foremost as Indonesians. As such, they consider the political participation of Chinese Indonesians

⁶⁴ Robert Hefner, “Market and Justice for Muslim Indonesians”, in *Market Culture: Society and Values in the New Asian Capitalism*, edited by Robert W. Hefner (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), pp. 230–32.

⁶⁵ Jamie Mackie, “Business Success Among Southeast Asian Chinese: the Role of Culture, Values, and Social Structure”, in *Market Culture*, edited by Hefner, pp. 142–43.

as a positive development that is evidence of Indonesia's democracy. Nevertheless, there is widespread worry about the unequal economic position between ethnic Chinese and Indonesians from other ethnic backgrounds for fear that it might create and increase tensions between the two groups.

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PUBLISHING

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Singapore 119614
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TRS6/17s

ISBN 978-981-4786-34-8



9 789814 786348