

Chinese Indonesian: Possibilities for Civil Society

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The central feature of modern Chinese political thinking in Indonesia revolves around the problems of national identity, including political and cultural identity. (Suryadinata 1996,xiv)

Introduction

In February 2003, the Chinese Lunar New Year, known as *Imlek*, was celebrated in public for the first time in more than 30 years by Chinese Indonesians. The celebration of the Year of the Horse proved to be momentous, marking the official recognition of this important date as a national holiday, with all of the ritual festivities and formal practices associated with a major event proclaimed by the government of this beleaguered nation-state. In the pages to follow, I will explore the reasons why this particular national event points to some of the key features of Chinese Indonesian cultural identity taken in its historical context. Two words associated with this celebration are notable: public and national. They point from a political history of oppression to one of hope for freedom.

Political discriminatory policy and cultural bias against the Chinese Indonesian, long a feature in the landscape of colonial and modern Indonesia, appears to be on the wane subsequent to the 1998 resignation of President Soeharto and evidence of legislative reform designed to relieve restrictive measures that held a small segment of the population in a highly vulnerable status. Continuous efforts since to establish a democratic and stable society, an aspiration of the post-Soeharto years falling under the rubric of *reformasi*, have promoted full participation of minority ethnic and religious groups in civil and political society. After 32

years of repressive regulations, current indications of robust engagement by Chinese Indonesians in the construction of a host of voluntary associations offers promise that the reformation movement genuinely points to an open social order. Yet, the cessation of violence against vulnerable populations remains to be accomplished, and the complex pluralism that gives shape to the archipelago of the world's fourth most populous nation proves to a source of contestation.

The month of May 1998 brought worldwide attention to the events that culminated in President Soeharto's departure from office. Voices of indignation were raised from many parts of the world upon learning that the streets of Jakarta, the nation's capital, were afire, buildings destroyed, shops looted and the human toll incalculable. It was the Chinese Indonesian community in this densely populated city as well as other significant centers where ethnic Chinese were apparently easy targets that suffered from a rampage which lasted through the summer. One historian of contemporary Indonesian political life summarized the horrific events during the week of May 13, noting the accounts recorded in numerous media (including electronic communications) as a scene from "hell, the air thick with black haze from fires," a veritable "war zone." (Van Dijk, 189)

Although the number of injured and killed continues to be contested, no doubt has been cast on the fact that Chinese Indonesians (as well as urban non-Chinese poor) were the particular object of the perpetrators of violence, and that Chinese Indonesian women had been raped, humiliated and murdered. Vivid stories of the terror women suffered appeared almost immediately in news accounts and cyber-communications, but the extent of the sexual violence has yet to be precisely reported. Many victims chose not to make their plight known for fear that the consequences of public testimony would be more punitive than the actual violation. Moreover, governmental reports and human rights groups within Indonesia were incapable of agreeing on their respective findings; and there was no official consensus on the matter of accountability. Who caused this terrifying onslaught? Provocateurs? Military operatives trained especially for this secret mission? Crowds of urban disgruntled who had a long history of anti-Chinese values? This latter suspicion accounts for the particular focus taken in the pages to follow.

Immediately after the massive devastation to homes, family life, economic security and sexual safety, many Chinese Indonesians fled the country or moved to less ethnically contested areas of Indonesia (especially Bali and Northern Sulawesi). This exodus was interpreted by some as affirmation of the belief that Chinese Indonesian were not patriots, were disloyal to nationalism and further – and most damning – that the rich financiers and corporate leaders who were of Chinese descent were withdrawing their considerable wealth from the fragile economy of Indonesia. Clearly, these views exemplified a minority position held and propagated by certain Indonesian spokespeople, but they helped to fuel the antagonisms that had long been held by many of the *pribumi* (Indonesian native born). Van Dijk writes that two years after the events in Jakarta "virulent anti-Chinese sentiments and religious animosity continued unabated," adding that "Anti-Chinese slogans were still visible on the walls." (Van Dijk, 250)

My presentation addresses the historic and contemporary position of Chinese Indonesians, with respect to citizenship and participation in civil society. Despite the persistence of prejudicial discourse and violence against Chinese Indonesians, the story of social change and the possibilities for a flourishing civil society merit attention here. Constituting almost five percent of the nation's population of 220 million, the Chinese Indonesian community has often been defined as "masalah Cina" (the Chinese problem). Clearly, they have been and continue to be associated within Indonesian political and cultural history as *different*. In part, this is a reflection of ways in which political powers (colonial, post-independence, current reformation) have constructed ethnic and racial classifications to "administer" this non-monolithic population. In part, it attests to the international politics of Indonesia, with special concern about the sovereignty and ideology of China (i.e., mainland or Taiwan, communism and co-operation with Western "liberal" governments).

In the abbreviated historical summary that follows, I will suggest several patterns that have prevailed from the colonial Dutch period through the Sukarno and Soeharto presidencies and offer some indication of the status of the ethnic Chinese Indonesian today.

From the period beginning with the presidency of Soeharto until his last years in office, laws and administrative regulations designed to "assimilate" the Chinese Indonesians living throughout the island nation state effectively destroyed aspects of culture and religion. At the same time, these policies confused the identity of this small segment of the total population, naming Chinese descendants as *Cina*, rather than *Tionghoa*, thereby conflating them with mainland China.

In my earlier study of Indonesian civil society and interfaith dialogue (Fischer, 2003), I focused on one association (*Interfidei*) working toward mutuality and respect among Indonesians of various faith traditions. In that work I came to appreciate the rich climate of *reformasi* and its efflorescence of voluntary agencies committed to an open social order. In the latter part of this essay, I will note some of the groups that have emerged in recent years to redress the second class status of Chinese Indonesians.

Historical Overview

The problem of the Chinese in Indonesia is complex. Prior to the Second World War it was related to the problem of political identity, that is Chinese nationality, Dutch "subjectship," and Indonesian "nationality." It later assumed cultural as well as economic dimensions.

(Suryadinata 1996, xviii)

The observation of Suryadinata regarding the changing character of identity among the Chinese Indonesians is exemplified in the celebration of *Imlek* (Chinese Lunar New Year). In early February 2003, implementing President Megawati Soekarnoputri's decree designating *Imlek* a national holiday, that which had been prohib-

ited as a public event was the occasion for celebration of recognition. One leader of the Chinese Indonesian community asserted this celebration was about the rediscovery of an ethnic identity that had been denied, and that the celebration was “an expression of cultural freedom.” (The Jakarta Post, 2/4/03). Accordingly, the historical record of Chinese Indonesians indicates a centuries-old struggle of a non-homogeneous people to gain acceptance as free citizens with a distinctive culture and a diverse religious identity. (L.Blusse, 1990; Suryadinata, 1996).

Sometime in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, a substantial migration of Chinese, especially from South-east China, settled in Java. They left China seeking relief from severe ecological crisis affecting agrarian life and consequent displacement from farming. They left, as well, because they opposed the constraints of a rigorously hierarchical social order where the four traditional layers of Confucian social order located most of these immigrants in the bottom rungs as farmers and merchants. Ironically, the social status and economic engagements of the newly arrived émigrés would eventually reverse Confucian privilege where entrepreneurs (i.e., traders and shopkeepers) were soon to have flourishing businesses. Nevertheless, the overseas Chinese (*Hoakiao*) were subjected to colonial (Dutch East Indies) policy that set limitations on the Confucian and Buddhist overseas Chinese, who represented a very different racial/ethnic/religious population than the dominant indigenous Muslim residents.

The creation of racial classification by the colonial power distinguished whites (including the small number of Japanese within the colony’s borders) from the second-class “foreign orientals” and the third class, and least acceptable, indigenous population. Obviously, this arrangement precluded assimilation of the Chinese and fostered the “growth of exclusiveness.” (Lie Tek Tjeng, 1970) Chinatowns (*kampung Cina*) were established, assuring physical separation. Further, the new population of Chinese was prohibited from securing farmlands, having the consequence of constructing urban folk and limiting economic opportunity. These policies became the stimulus for mercantile activity, and trading became the dominant activity that continued through the centuries, underpinning the success of an elite group of Chinese businessmen. Many were to become leaders in finance and capitalist entrepreneurs of extraordinary wealth. At the time of the 1998 riots, this identification of the Chinese Indonesian with prosperity in an economy failing during the last days of Soeharto’s New Order administration was patently clear and provides some understanding of the mass distrust for Chinese residents of Jakarta’s Chinatown. However, only a small number of the Chinese Indonesian families attained such wealth.

Language and schooling, during the colonial period, encouraged greater separation from the majority of Indonesians. The Chinese speaking *totoks* preferred to educate their children in Chinese schools, enjoy religious life identified with their roots in the “motherland” and continue strong connections to China. Lie Tek Tjeng suggests this was an obvious consequence of the discrimination they experienced in Java. (Lie, 215) He observes that theirs was an ambiguous status — privileged economically but victims of racial exclusion and distrust. Blusse adds that theirs was an “identity crisis,” when “no longer a Chinese, not yet a

Dutchman, a half-baked Javanese.” (Blusse, 5)

In the political shift from colonial governance under the Dutch and occupation by the Japanese (during the World War II years) to the early years of independence, a novel ideology was proclaimed that embraced equality in citizenship and freedom of religion. The doctrine of *Pancasila* (the visionary five-point decree promulgated as an integral feature of the post-revolutionary political mission) was perceived as a promise of democratic life for the citizenry, regardless of ethnic or religious identity. This ideology, with its checkered history under the New Order (and the 32-year regime of Soeharto), continues to be embraced by the vast majority of Indonesians as critical to an Indonesian civil society and plays a significant role in the discourse among interfaith activists today. Ethnic Chinese, at the time of the promulgation of *Pancasila* as fundamental law, anticipated that full recognition as citizens would be accorded to them. This proved to be in error. Unanimity among ethnic Chinese about the strategy and associational life that would follow from legal implementation of an egalitarian ideology was not in evidence either. (Considerable literature points to the many factions and Chinese Indonesian leaders representing a host of positions along a continuum from assimilation, without the retention of any Chinese cultural practices, to an aspiration for discreet, separate lifestyle with acceptance of diversity.) (Tan, 1991)

The first President of independent Indonesia, Soekarno, proved to be less than supportive of Chinese Indonesian business. In 1959 the President issued restrictive regulations that resulted in a major exodus to China. One Asian scholar, a former general reflecting on the post-1998 riots and the earlier flight of Chinese Indonesians from their homeland, recalled that the “Chinese government announced that they did not wish persons of Chinese descent to be treated unfairly.” He noted how “tens of thousands” wished to return to China in 1959, but only three ships were sent, clearly an inadequate number for their transportation. (Tempo, 2001) The struggle between pro-and anti-communism forces under Soekarno’s Guided Democracy administration culminated in the 1965 termination of the first presidency and the subsequent cessation of diplomatic relations with the Chinese government. It was only in 1990 that relations between the two nations were restored with formal recognition of the PRC.

Official attitudes about the Chinese Indonesian population deteriorated under President Soeharto, who systematically initiated a campaign of severe restrictions on all facets of ethnic Chinese life. These harsh regulations, beginning in 1965 and prevailing throughout most of Soeharto’s New Order administration, touched every aspect of life for the ethnic Chinese. Justifying these measures as an effort to accomplish assimilation, some 50 laws and administrative rules were passed and implemented over a 30-year period. Despite some modification of the legal codes today, many discriminatory regulations remain as reminders that ethnic Chinese have yet to attain full citizenship. Among the prohibitions controlling the status and mobility of Chinese Indonesians: the closure of “foreign schools,” the cessation of instruction of Chinese languages and the prohibition of work permits or residency for new Chinese immigrants.

Perhaps the most far-reaching official regulations were those excluding facets of cultural traditional life that prohibited public celebration of Chinese festivals. Traditional activities had to be conducted privately (i.e., within the home). Public displays of art and theater that reflected “Chinese” cultural life were also banned. Books and calendars, magazines and advertisements, clothing, greeting cards, signs and medicinal labels could not use Chinese characters. Regulations required that those of Chinese ethnic background carry a special identity card known as “K1,” a reference to provisional Indonesian citizenship, regardless of Indonesian birth. Further, the SBKRI (certificate of citizenship for the Republic of Indonesia) requisite for school admission, business activity and marriage was not issued to those of Chinese descent. No mitigation of these prohibitions occurred during the three generations of New Order governance.

In 1996 President Soeharto nullified the certificate requirement and his successor President Habibie decreed that all forms of racial discrimination must cease. President Abdurrahman Wahid went further in liberalizing the status of Chinese Indonesians. He preceded the current president in calling for recognition of Chinese New Year and the restoration of Chinese religious practices. However, at this time, there remain administrative practices that fail to reflect the orders decreed by each of those presidents.

Of note, during the New Order years and continuing until recently, Confucian and Buddhist temples continued to operate in spite of the non-recognition of all Chinese religions, so long as activities remained interior and private. Chinese temples were “transformed” into Buddhist Viharas using Sanskrit names. (Both Buddhism and Hinduism are designated as official Indonesian religions, along with Christianity, Catholicism and Islam). The operative test of religious belief has been the theological notion of monotheism that neither indigenous nor so-called Chinese faith beliefs conform to, according to official decree.

These restrictions were designed to efface Indonesian life of any trace of its specifically ethnic Chinese population. Consequently, a generation of ethnic Chinese grew up without access to the language of their forebears deprived of cultural artifacts and recognition of their religious practices. Further, many families of Chinese descent abandoned their Chinese names. The chief exception, however, were prominent Chinese Indonesians who were vastly successful in the economic sector. President Soeharto was dependent upon the support of this elite business class. But the negative side of this inclusion in Jakarta’s powerful inner circle was that the high visibility of these insiders contributed to prejudice against all Chinese Indonesians as plundering exploiters benefiting from the corrupt practices of the New Order bureaucracy.

In the summer of 1995, a number of wealthy ethnic Chinese business people met in Bali to discuss the “Chinese problem” and the *Pancasila* promise of equality. A document, the Bali Declaration, was released at the end of the two-day session, which took note of national development and the implications of an impoverished nation with massive unemployment. A commitment was made to share a percentage of the several conglomerates’ wealth. (Suryadinata, 246-7) This endeavor did not abate the increasing fever of hatred for ethnic Chinese in general, who were collapsed into a category of selfish, uncaring people; 1998 saw the

consequences, in part, of this sense of inequity held by the so-called “have-nots.”

Civil Society and Interfaith Dialogue

Why does Indonesia always have ethnic conflicts? This country was designed to be multi-ethnic... it can only be rebuilt with a multiethnic spirit.

(The Jakarta Post, 2/04/03)

The acclaimed badminton champion, quoted above, shared his views in a newspaper interview in early 2003, insisting that multi-ethnicity must be the acknowledged official position of the nation. Tan Joe Hok, who won international titles for Indonesia, was denied citizenship in the very nation he represented more than 40 years ago. Another more recent case of a Chinese Indonesian badminton star excluded from citizenship received special attention from the president in 2002. The athlete was exempted from the exclusionary rules that precluded full citizenship status. In both instances, the irony of national heroes classified as other than citizens is not lost on the many Chinese Indonesian leaders who have emerged as public figures since 1998. Formal administrative discrimination persists despite presidential decrees. A number of voluntary associations dedicated to the elimination of Indonesian’s structural inequities based on ethnic and racial prejudice have begun to re-shape attitudes and values, calling upon the public and the government to recognize and respect the cultural and political merit of Chinese Indonesians. Among the groups that organized after the horrific days of riot in May 1998, there are associations redressing human rights infractions and others concerned with the multi-ethnicity Tan Joe Hoe asserts is critical to the cessation of conflict.

In this essay, several associations are selected for brief mention. It is important to note the fact that Chinese Indonesian cultural and political groups functioned throughout the repressive times of the New Order, adhering to a diverse set of concerns and programs for the improvement of their constituents. However, I have selected only three associations currently engaged in social change action in the promotion of cultural and political equality post-Soeharta autocratic rule. These exemplify the *public* commitment of citizens who have recognized the opportunity opened by *reformasi* policy to work publicly for the abolition of racism and ethnic bias. Two other groups addressing ethnic and religious conflict with elaborate programs of education designed to build bridges of mutuality are also mentioned here. In each of the five associations, the leadership has fostered a strong recognition of Indonesian cultural diversity, with its variety of traditional practices in art and ritual. It is remarkable that years of forced “assimilation” did not annihilate these expressions of Chinese ethnicity and that they are now undergoing renewal in the public arena. The oppressive efforts by the New Order administration seemingly privatized Chinese Indonesian customs without extinguishing them altogether.

One association organized in 1998, the Indonesian Chinese Social Association (*Paguyban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia* – PSMI), is especially concerned about collaboration with other ethnic groups and the

human rights of those who have suffered from political violence and racial hatred. Its chairman, Tedy Jusuf, formerly a general in the Indonesian military, attends meetings of the National Commission on Human Rights (KOMNAS-HAM), informally representing Chinese Indonesian claims. The work of PSMI includes support of the organizations many offices in some 117 cities. Recently, the organization has begun efforts to create a national museum that will display materials related to all facets of the Chinese Indonesian experience. The opening is scheduled for 2005 in Jakarta. Public and national, the words introducing this essay, precisely describe the implications of this major step in Chinese Indonesian identity.

Another group, INTI (Chinese Indonesian Association), has as its mission the promotion of equality through education. Its outreach effort extends to universities — public and religious — for the purpose of changing values and attitudes about people of Chinese descent. The leaders of INTI understand their goals to be nation building, fostering programs and policies for economic and inter-faith cooperation. They are in the forefront of promoting official recognition of Confucianism as a belief within the Indonesian context. There are parallels between INTI and other Indonesian groups created for purposes of mutuality among faiths. The association, *Solidaritas Nusa Bangsa* (SNB) has gained international credibility through its persistent struggle against all forms of violence brought about by structural inequities. Ester Jusuf, one of its most outspoken leaders, has worked tirelessly on behalf of victims of the 1998 riots as well as others marked as ethnic outsiders. A publication recounting the organizations efforts during the first year after the 1998 riots is instructive in delineating the conflict's context and the complicity of military and intelligence forces in the horrendous violence waged against minorities. (*Solidaritas Nusa Bangsa*, 1999)

In examining the role of interfaith associations in the current politics of stabilization, there is sound reason for mixed sentiment. On the positive side, numerous groups have emerged after 1998 with the express purpose of constructing understanding across religious lines. Yet, church burnings, civil strife in Aceh, West Papua (formerly Irian Jaya) and Central Sulawesi persist, with every indication that peaceful negotiation remains a challenge to the central government.

How has religion served as catalyst to non-violent dialogue and social change?

The island nation of Indonesia, diverse in its linguistic and cultural composition, has the largest Muslim population in the world (approximately 88 percent of its more than 210 million people). Although provisions of the national ideology of *Pancasila* explicitly call for religious freedom and the national logo of “unity in diversity” promotes a general value of respect for all populations and the rejection of both privileged and excluded faith traditions, this official endorsement of pluralism is less embracing than the formal language and national symbolism of the Jakarta-dominated government. When the five principles of *Pancasila* were agreed upon at the nation's founding, the promise of religious freedom was tempered by the first provision recognizing monotheism as the common ground for all Indonesians. Unity proved to be an exclusive doctrine that served a culture of competing beliefs, distrust and hegemonic dismissal of Chinese religious practices.

As I have indicated, the restrictive provisions enacted under Soeharto's rule further excluded the public recognition of Chinese cultural and religious practices.

In 1991, a small group of interfaith activists established a non-governmental association, *Dian Interfidei* (hereafter, DI), with two principal commitments: 1) an ecumenical view of Christian-Catholic collaboration on behalf of 2) an expansive dialogue among people of all faith traditions. DI represents one of several interfaith groups that work with diverse populations for greater acceptance of diversity, especially among youth. The leadership of DI, among them a theologian and professor of Missiology – “Pak” Sumartana (“Pak” is an honorific title), communicated belief in a thoroughgoing understanding of religion and the promise of pluralism, pushing the boundaries of previously understood views of what constituted religious identity in Indonesia. From the inception of DI, religion and ethnicity have been knotted together, with participation by indigenous and Chinese Indonesians as well as Christians, Catholics and Muslims. (Newsletter, 1998) This clear rejection of assimilation by any ethnic or religious group bespeaks the association's refusal to allow any person to be subordinated to another's point of view. Communication of difference is encouraged. At the many meetings convened by DI, Muslims pray, Javanese mystics chant and ethnic Chinese offer ritual devotions. Chinese New Year was celebrated by the DI participants well before President Abdurrahman Wahid lifted the New Order restraints on ethnic Chinese.

Established weeks after the 1998 riots, *Padi Kasih (Panca Dian Kasih)* is a foundation dedicated to a “culture of dialogue, cooperation and peace among ethnic people and faiths,” offering a variety of training sessions and workshops under the rubric of the Rainbow Society Program. A member of its executive board has created an action-oriented institute (Indonesian Pluralism Institute or IPI) that substantively implements the meaning of pluralism in its blood donor services program and its education media program. The production of a film on aspects of Chinese identity in a community adjacent to Jakarta is planned and will be distributed in the school system as part of multicultural education efforts.

Conclusion

Despite threats from a conservative group, more than 200 Muslims of Chinese descent for the first time held their New Year *Imlek* ceremonies in the Syuhada Mosque in Yogyakarta.

(The Jakarta Post, 2/15/03)

Despite fears that the Chinese Muslim celebration of Lunar New Year in the mosque would incite conflict, there was no trouble and another step was taken toward greater tolerance in Indonesian religious life. Similarly, Balinese Confucians prayed at Vihara temples in this predominately Hindu province, which also marked the holy night of Siva, *Siwarati*. It would seem that civil society is emerging in this strife-ridden archipelago nation state, and that beliefs and customs associated with Chinese descendants are no longer artifacts of a time

past – expressions banned in public places and sources of popular contempt. Although many ethnic Chinese sought refuge away from Indonesia during the turmoil of the late 1990s, confidence is slowly being restored in the viability of living within central urban areas. A form of what I term “religious citizenship” has found a new generation of Chinese Indonesians struggling for full citizenship in the public arena. Three ethical practices define “religious citizenship”: recognition, respect and responsibility.

For most of the modern period in Indonesia (colonial, revolutionary, and independence), the distinctiveness of ethnic Chinese has been analyzed as a negative issue and with good reason. Policies of exclusion and separation prevailed, fortifying prejudicial stereotype and fostering suspicion and distrust. One expression of policy refers to the role of legitimate political power and its capacity to label difference and implement a policy of spatial enclave. In discriminating between *totoks* and *peranakans* (Chinese speaking and Indonesian speaking, respectively), nationals and foreigners between categories of natives (“pribumi”) and ethnic Chinese, the culture of diversity was constructed as a culture of real citizens and those on the margins who were obliged to assimilate and become same, an obligation that included the erosion of ancestral lineage of name and religious practice.

This culture of xenophobia was justified as benign assimilation, disallowing public exercise of religion as well as Chinese language and cultural traditions with the net effect of privatization. This insularity, both as a matter of residence and economic activity, placed the ethnic Chinese population in jeopardy, as they experienced in May 1998. Finally, the assumption of a monolithic ethnicity has been a gross misunderstanding, flawed in the characterization of citizenship that has no connection with a motherland. The troubled political history of Indonesia, especially in its international relations with China, established barriers for the ethnic Chinese that continue to puzzle with regard to bridges between the citizens of Indonesia and those of both the Chinese and Taiwanese Republics.

As a final and more hopeful word, I refer to the chair of INTI and his assessment of past and future: “Discrimination... hampered social integration and, of course, was not good for the country because the potential of the Chinese minority was neglected. Now it seems that the orientation has shifted to exploring the nation’s potentials for the common good.” (The Jakarta Post, 2/4/03)

I would like to thank two Indonesians who have helped me to understand the complexity of the Chinese Indonesian setting: Dr. Gondomono and William Kwam of IPI.

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