

ETHNIC STUDIES

edited by LEO SURYADINATA

# CHINESE INDONESIANS

**State Policy,  
Monoculture and  
Multiculture**



EASTERN UNIVERSITIES PRESS  
by Marshall Cavendish

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# Preface

The *Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia* (Journal of Anthropology Indonesia) organized a third international symposium in Bali on 16–19 July 2002. The theme was “Rebuilding Indonesia: A Nation of ‘Unity in Diversity’—Towards a Multicultural Society”. I was invited by the organizer to form a panel to discuss the topic, “Ethnic Chinese and Multicultural Society”. With the help of Dr. Yunita Winarto, the conference organizer, I was able to invite a number of scholars, namely Charles Coppel, Mely G. Tan, Parsudi Suparlan, Usman Pelly, Myra Sidharta and Pamela Allen to present papers at the conference. These papers were later revised for publication.

To reach a wider audience, *Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia* decided to publish six papers in *Bahasa Indonesia*, while the English version will be published as a separate book. I have been invited to be the guest editor for both the Indonesian and English versions. Due to time constraints, I have not been able to include Parsudi Suparlan’s paper in the English edition. However, I have included my other paper on ethnic Chinese literature in this book, as the paper is relevant to the theme of this volume.

**Leo Suryadinata**

September 1, 2003

# Introduction

The Chinese have lived in Indonesia for centuries and their number is quite significant. However, the ethnic issue was considered to be sensitive; ethnic information was therefore never included in Indonesia's censuses before 2000. As a result, one has to rely on the 1930 census for calculating the number of ethnic groups, including that of the ethnic Chinese. According to the 1930 census, there were 1.2 million Chinese in colonial Indonesia, constituting 2.03 percent of the total population. Since then, some scholars have estimated that the percentage of Chinese in Indonesia is between 2.5 and 3 percent. However, non-scholars estimate that they constitute between 4 and 5 percent.

Nevertheless, the 2000 census, which includes the number of ethnic Chinese, is incomplete. Only in the 11 major provinces (out of 30 provinces) are there figures on the Chinese. However, from the available information, it appears that the number of Chinese is lower than expected. According to our estimate, there are about 3 million Chinese, constituting about 1.5 percent of the Indonesian population. This is due to three factors: (1) many Chinese have left Indonesia; (2) the growth rate of the ethnic Chinese is far lower than the other ethnic groups; and (3) many Chinese refuse to identify themselves with the ethnic Chinese groups. It should be noted that in the 2000 Population Census, the ethnic information was based on self-identity.

The last factor, in fact, is closely linked to the Indonesian state policy, which is one of the major themes of the collection of papers in this book. Leo Suryadinata's first chapter examines Indonesian state policy towards the ethnic Chinese with special reference to the New Order and post-Suharto era. During the 32 years of Suharto's rule, the assimilation policy was adopted, characterized by the elimination of the "three pillars" of Chinese culture. These three pillars were Chinese-medium schools, Chinese organizations and Chinese media. In addition, the government also prohibited the display of Chinese symbols, including the Chinese language, "encouraged" the use of "Indonesian names" rather than Chinese names, and introduced restrictions in the celebration of Chinese festivals. Due to political and social pressure, many Chinese Indonesians were forced to assimilate. They no longer identified themselves with the ethnic Chinese group because they felt that they had already been assimilated.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the Chinese community did not disappear. In fact, many Chinese still felt that they were “ethnic Chinese” or, more appropriately, either “Indonesian Chinese” or “Chinese Indonesians”. The former tended to emphasize their “Chineseness” while the latter stressed their “Indonesianness”. Nevertheless, they were ready to admit that they were still “ethnic Chinese”. The stepping down of Suharto also marked the end of the assimilation policy. With the new policy of pluralism or “multiculturalism”, it is possible that there will be a resurgence of the ethnic Chinese identity in Indonesia.

Charles Coppel’s chapter discusses the difficulty of the ethnic Chinese in being accepted by Indonesian nationalists as part of the Indonesian nation (*bangsa Indonesia*). Examining the colonial history of Indonesia up to the present day, he argues that colonial society was based on racial division, and that Indonesian nationalists had also been heavily influenced by this colonial thinking. As a result, the Indonesian nationalist movement was separated from the *peranakan* Chinese community. Apart from this, the rise of “overseas Chinese nationalism” also took place prior to the emergence of Indonesian nationalism. This ethnic nationalism was also responsible for the separation of the ethnic Chinese from the Indonesian nationalist movement, which was led by *pribumi* (indigenous Indonesians). This case is different from that of the Philippines, where the Chinese *mestizo* (*peranakan* Chinese in the Philippines) identified themselves with Philippine nationalism and became an integral part of the Philippine nation.

It is therefore not surprising that the Indonesian nation is based on the *pribumi* model while the ethnic Chinese are considered to be *Vreemde Oosterlingen* (Foreign Oriental). This was especially evident during the Suharto era, as the government intended to absorb the ethnic Chinese into the *pribumi*-based nation. Usman Pelly’s chapter examines Suharto’s educational policy towards the ethnic Chinese community. He conducted field research in eight “assimilated” schools during the New Order period and compared the values of the students in two types of schools, national schools and private schools (private schools consisted of two types: those managed by the Christian foundation and those managed by the Islamic foundation). He concludes that among these school students, those who went to schools managed by the Islamic foundation were more “assimilated” than those in national schools. However, as a whole, ethnic Chinese students were not yet completely assimilated as was



expected by the government. Chinese Indonesians still wanted to maintain their ethnic identity although they were oriented towards Indonesian society.

Anti-Chinese discrimination and violence are the main themes of Mely Tan's chapter. She highlights the discrimination and violence against women in general and Chinese women in particular. She argues that this violence is based on a "gender bias" culture in which women have a lower social status than men. The violence against women (including Chinese women) is not new, and the May 1998 tragedy, in which Chinese women fell victim, was the latest occurrence, but this event has given rise to a new consciousness about the issue of violence against women in Indonesia. The chapter also addresses the issue of poor Chinese women in West Kalimantan, who were exported to Taiwan as "brides" or "slaves", and their experiences of hardship and suffering. Again, this is due to the "gender bias" culture. It is therefore crucial to change the "mindset" of Indonesians, both Chinese and non-Chinese, to prevent the recurrence of, and to reduce, violence against women.

The process of integration for the Chinese in Indonesia has been slow. Myra Sidharta examines the Chinese in Bali in general, and the Hainanese in particular, to show the long process of integration, using a few case studies. She argues that the older generation of male Chinese Indonesians, despite intermarriages with Balinese women, has maintained its Chinese, rather than non-Chinese, identity. Although there has been a mixture of the two cultures, Chinese cultural elements are still strong. However, during the 32 years of the New Order, the Hainanese community in Bali became much more "Indonesianized".

As a matter of fact, the Suharto assimilation policy has had a profound impact on ethnic Chinese literature in Indonesia. The literature, which consists of the *peranakan* literature and the *totok* (Yinhua) literature, underwent a drastic change. The former, which is written in Indonesian, was transformed into an "Indonesian literature" which almost lost its ethnic identity, while the latter, which is written in Chinese, was suppressed and became almost extinct. However, with the end of the New Order, ethnic Chinese literature in Indonesia has been given a second chance. Leo Suryadinata in his second chapter examines the above-mentioned literature from a historical perspective, differentiating between these two types of literature and their respective fates. In response to strong Indonesian nationalism, ethnic Chinese literature has transformed itself into "Indonesianized literature". While the *peranakan* literature is



accepted as being part of Indonesian literature, the Yinhua literature has encountered some difficulty. Nevertheless, it appears that there have been efforts from both sides—ethnic Chinese writers and indigenous writers—to promote closer cooperation.

The post-Suharto ethnic Chinese literature is also the theme of Pamela Allen's chapter. In her view, Chinese Indonesian writers have generated new voices towards the end of Suharto's regime, especially after the May 1998 tragedy. These writers have revolved around the few new literary societies and have made their voices heard. Nevertheless, their "Chineseness" is different from the "Chineseness" often perceived by others in the past, because their "Chineseness" has been mixed with the Indonesian tradition. Their orientation and reference are no longer towards their ancestral land but Indonesia. Therefore, their spirit is the Indonesian spirit. In this chapter, Pamela Allen examines the poems produced by the Yinhua (Chinese Indonesian) writers who first wrote in the Chinese language, but later translated their works into *Bahasa Indonesia*.

This book consists of seven chapters dealing with the Chinese in Indonesia. All of the chapters address the issue of the state and its impact on society and culture, but from different perspectives. It is difficult to deny that the Indonesian state has played a major role in shaping the political, social and cultural lives of Chinese Indonesians as shown in the book.

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# Indonesian State Policy Towards Ethnic Chinese: From Assimilation to Multiculturalism?

LEO SURYADINATA

In many multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, nation-building has often become the urgent task of the government. Under the authoritarian rule of Suharto, the state introduced an assimilationist policy towards the ethnic Chinese. As the model of the Indonesian nation was based on indigeneity, the ethnic Chinese, considered to be foreign, were expected to be absorbed into the “native population”. However, after the fall of Suharto and the rise of a more democratic regime, this policy has been gradually abandoned and multiculturalism has been adopted. This chapter aims to examine the evolving concept of the Indonesian nation, the changing state policies towards the ethnic Chinese and the responses of this minority, especially after the fall of the New Order regime. The revival of Chinese ethnicity and its relationship with nation-building in the land of the Garuda will also be discussed.

## ASSIMILATIONIST POLICY OF SUHARTO

There is no doubt that Suharto introduced an assimilationist policy towards the ethnic Chinese. However, it does not mean that the same policy was introduced prior to the Suharto era. In fact, due to the practice of democracy during the parliamentary period (1949–1958),

it was difficult, if not impossible, to adopt an assimilationist policy, as assimilation is against democratic principles. However, during the Guided Democracy period (1959–1965), the regime was semi-authoritarian, yet some pluralistic features were retained. Nevertheless, more elements of integration, if not assimilation, had been introduced. This was reflected in the government policy on the restriction of entry into Chinese-medium schools and the number and management of Chinese newspapers. Children of Indonesian citizens were prohibited from going to these schools and many foreign-run newspapers were closed down. Nevertheless, this was not assimilationist as the three pillars of Chinese culture—the Chinese-language press, Chinese-medium schools and ethnic Chinese organizations—were still in existence.

It was only during Suharto's authoritarian rule (1966–1998) that the rather comprehensive assimilation policy was introduced. Suharto himself clearly stated that “the Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent should integrate and assimilate themselves into the indigenous Indonesian society (*masyarakat Indonesia asli*) without delay”.<sup>1</sup> However, when examining Suharto's various policies carefully, one will realize that some policies were non-assimilationist, if not anti-assimilationist, due to the objective socio-political conditions. For instance, the tolerance towards minority religions and the differentiation between “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” Indonesians tended to divide rather than unite the ethnic Chinese and indigenous Indonesians. In other words, the ethnic Chinese remained separated from the host communities.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that the major characteristics of the policy during the New Order regime constituted assimilation. The most important one was the eradication of the three pillars of Chinese culture.

Soon after assuming power, the Suharto regime closed down all but one Chinese newspaper. The only “Chinese” newspaper was run by the government and controlled by the military. It was a half-Chinese, half-Indonesian daily which was popular among the ethnic Chinese who put up notices and advertisements. The import of Chinese-language publications was prohibited. From 1966 onwards, no Chinese-medium schools were allowed to operate and the use of the Chinese language was discouraged. Although the government initially allowed the introduction of some “Special Project National Schools” for foreign

Chinese children, these schools were eventually banned in 1975. Only one type of “national school” was allowed for the ethnic Chinese, regardless of their citizenship. The banning of all ethnic Chinese socio-political organizations was also assimilationist in nature, as ethnic Chinese were only allowed to join the indigene-dominated organizations. Ethnic Chinese who were interested in political activities could only join the existing Indonesian political parties (Golkar, PPP and PDI). Although there were some broker-type organizations such as the Centre of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and Badan Komunikasi (Communication Body, BAKOM) which included ethnic Chinese, these were not, strictly speaking, Chinese organizations.

Nevertheless, the most effective assimilation policy to change the Chinese identity was that of name-changing. In 1966, Suharto introduced this policy, pressurizing the ethnic Chinese to change their Chinese names to “Indonesian-sounding” names. It is interesting to note that the so-called Indonesian names are in reality “non-Chinese” names. The name-changing was not compulsory, but during the early years of the New Order period, the majority of Chinese Indonesians changed their names as name-changing was often regarded as “evidence” of “political loyalty to Indonesia” or identification with the Indonesian nation.

The basis of the assimilationist policy can be found in the concept of the Indonesian nation, which is based on the indigenous model. The idea of indigeneity (or indigenism) is not new. This is the concept of the “sons of the soil”, who lay claim to the land and hence have more rights than immigrants. All Indonesian *sukus* (ethnic groups) were declared to be indigenous as their homelands were within the boundary of the Republic of Indonesia, while the ethnic Chinese were originally from China and therefore were foreigners. If they wanted to become Indonesians, the only acceptable way was to be assimilated into the indigenous Indonesian population. This kind of assimilation is incorporation rather than amalgamation. In other words, the Chinese were expected to give up their Chinese characteristics and assume the indigenous cultural characteristics. In the absence of a concrete concept of the Indonesian nation, the Chinese were expected to be assimilated into the indigenous population of the provinces where they resided.

However, Suharto’s assimilation policy had mixed results. On the one hand, it made the ethnic Chinese culturally less Chinese as they lost command of the Chinese language and became much more entrenched



in the Indonesian “national culture”, but on the other hand, the majority continued to retain “separate identities” as the Suharto regime “offered” opportunities for the preservation of ethnic Chinese identity under the state ideology of Pancasila. This state ideology which allows the freedom of religion gave ethnic Chinese in Indonesia the opportunity to “hide behind” the minority religious identity. Buddhism, Tridharma and Confucianism are largely Chinese religions and have massive Chinese followings. Through religions, the ethnic Chinese identity was retained. Besides, the regime introduced policies which resulted in continuing ethnic/racial division. For instance, the population was divided into indigenous and non-indigenous groups. Furthermore, the regime confined the Chinese to the economic field, unintentionally increasing their economic strength and isolating the Chinese from the economically weaker indigenous masses.

### THE DECLINE OF THE ASSIMILATION POLICY

In May 1998, after serious riots in Jakarta and continuous student demonstrations against the Suharto regime, many of Suharto’s allies decided to forsake him. Unable to cope with the situation, Suharto was eventually forced to step down. The *reformasi* movement took place and the new regime headed by B. J. Habibie was compelled to democratize Indonesian politics. Almost immediately after Suharto’s downfall, new political parties were formed. More than 100 parties emerged, of which three were ethnic Chinese-dominated parties: Partai Reformasi Tionghoa Indonesia (Parti), Partai Pembauran Indonesia, and Partai Bhinneka Tunggal Ika Indonesia (PBI).<sup>2</sup> Some ethnic Chinese disagreed with the establishment of ethnic Chinese parties but wanted to have non-party Chinese organizations. The first Chinese NGO formed was the Paguyuban Marga Sosial Tionghoa Indonesia (PMSTI, known as Yinni Baijiaxing Xiehui), which later split, and a new NGO, known as Perhimpunan Keturunan Tionghoa Indonesia (abbreviated as INTI) was set up. There were also other smaller Chinese NGOs, including Gandi, Solidaritas Nusa-Bangsa, SIMPATIK etc., which were formed specifically to combat racial discrimination in Indonesia. It is important to note the revival of Chinese writers’ associations during this time. In Jakarta alone, there were at least two such organizations: Yinhua Zuoja Xiehui (Indonesian Chinese Writers’ Association) and Zhuguo Wenyi Xiehui (Fatherland Literary Association). The

Confucian religion (Matakin), which was de-recognized by the Suharto regime in 1979, also gained prominence.

The post-Suharto era also witnessed the rise of Chinese clan associations. Almost every major clan, such as the Hokkien, Hokcia, Hakka and Cantonese clans, has been revived, and some clans—for instance, the Hakka—have three rival associations competing to represent the speech group. According to one source, there are more than 400 Chinese associations, including many clan associations, in Indonesia.

With the re-emergence of ethnic-based socio-political and cultural organizations, the first pillar of Chinese culture has been restored. Soon after the establishment of these parties and Chinese NGOs, the use of the Chinese language was relaxed. Chinese-language institutes (not regular Chinese-medium schools) have also been allowed to operate, and Chinese-language magazines and Chinese dictionaries have also been on sale in Jakarta. However, not too many Chinese-language newspapers were permitted at the beginning. About ten Chinese-language newspapers were granted publishing licences only after the 1999 election. Nevertheless, many old regulations restricting Chinese-language publications have not been officially repealed, making legal conflicts in the future possible. However, the Chinese (Mandarin) channel on Indonesian television has been set up for the first time, although the broadcast time is brief. This means that the second pillar of Chinese culture has also been restored.

The teaching of the Chinese language, however, is still limited to universities and special language schools, and no full-fledged Chinese-medium schools have been allowed to operate. Apparently, the Indonesian government continues to favour the national education system for the ethnic Chinese. The third pillar of Chinese culture—regular Chinese-medium schools—has not yet been fully restored, but it is clear that the assimilation policy of Suharto has gradually been abandoned.

Indeed, during the Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) presidency, he and his cabinet members attended the celebration of the Chinese New Year (in February 2000) in Jakarta, which was organized by Matakin. He also abrogated Presidential Decision No. 14/1967 which prohibited Chinese Indonesians from celebrating Chinese festivals in public.<sup>3</sup> On 31 March 2000, the Minister of Home Affairs, Surjadi, issued a new instruction (No. 477/805/Sj) which repealed the 1978 Circular (*Surat Edaran*) that recognized only five religions, excluding Confucianism.<sup>4</sup> During the Megawati presidency, President Megawati moved one step