



CHINESE INDONESIANS REASSESSED

History, religion and belonging

Edited by Siew-Min Sai and Chang-Yau Hoon

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Chinese Indonesians Reassessed

The Chinese in Indonesia form a significant minority of about 3 percent of the population, and have played a disproportionately important role in the country. Given that Chinese Indonesians are not seen as indigenous to the country and are consistently defined against Indonesian nationalism, most studies on the community concentrate on examining their ambivalent position as Indonesia's perennial "internal outsider." *Chinese Indonesians Reassessed* argues for the need to dislodge this narrow nationalistic approach and adopt fresh perspectives which acknowledge the full complexity of ethnic relations within the country. The focus of the book extends beyond Java to explore the historical development of Chinese Indonesian communities in more peripheral areas of Indonesia, such as Medan, the Riau Islands and West Kalimantan. It reveals the diverse religious practices of Chinese Indonesians, which are by no means confined to "Chinese" religions, and the celebration of "Chinese" ethnic events. Presenting a rich array of historical and contemporary case studies, the book goes beyond national stereotypes to demonstrate how Chinese Indonesians interact with different spaces and environments to establish new Chinese Indonesian identities which are complex and multi-faceted. The book engages with a larger global literature concerned with diasporic Chinese identities and practices and offers sophisticated and empirically grounded insights on the commodification of ethnic cultures and religions.

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Introduction

A critical reassessment of Chinese Indonesian Studies

Siew-Min Sai and Chang-Yau Hoon

Reassessing the “Chinese Problem” in Indonesia

Constituting between 2 and 3 percent of Indonesia's total population, Chinese Indonesians form a heterogeneous ethnic community (Suryadinata, Arifin and Ananta 2003; Mackie 2005). They are but one out of more than 300 ethnic groups in a country that has celebrated its ethnic diversity by adopting, since its independence in 1945, the official motto of “Unity in Diversity” (Ind.: *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*). Despite such a motto, Chinese Indonesians do not possess the same status as other ethnic community groups who are perceived as “native” (Ind.: *asli/pribumi*) to Indonesia. A long history of Chinese migration to Indonesia beginning from pre-colonial times appears to condemn this ethnic community to the permanent status of “essential outsiders” (Chirot and Reid 1997), a popular idea expressed through labelling Chinese Indonesians as “non-natives” (Ind.: *non-pribumi*). As Aguilar's perceptive remarks on the hidden racialized logic of Indonesia's thinking about its territorial space suggest, “the Chinese are attributed a definite and knowable place of origin – China – and a first set of ancestors from ‘outside’ who first set foot on ‘Indonesia.’ With a focus on the past and the many first landings that the past is made to hold, the descendants (*keturunan*) are indelibly linked to the first-generation immigrants and, in an unbroken chain, remain forever aliens” (Aguilar 2001: 517). Given the contentious ways in which the Chinese have been defined against Indonesian nationhood, the diagnostics of Indonesian nationalism continue to cast long shadows on studies concerned with this ethnic community. Against such a backdrop, this book embarks on a collective attempt to angle new directions in studies on the ethnic Chinese and issues pertaining to Chineseness in Indonesia. The key problem the book addresses is the limitations of studying the Chinese in Indonesia as an ethnic community and the need to move beyond the issue of Chinese (non)belonging to the Indonesian nation.

The chapters in this book reflect a continued engagement with the ambivalent position of Chinese Indonesians. The book is, however, premised on the argument that it is timely to bring a renewed sense of cogency and critical reflection to the burgeoning research on the ethnic Chinese and Chineseness in Indonesia. The stunning increase in the number of articles and books published on the Chinese Indonesians in the aftermath of the regime change in May 1998 underscores

the extent to which scholars have given this heterogeneous community unprecedented attention in the field of contemporary Indonesian Studies. This post-1998 state of affairs stands in marked contrast to the Suharto or pre-Suharto years, when research on the Chinese Indonesians was seen as “a marginal enterprise” (Lindsey and Pausacker 2005 :1). The New Order regime’s long-standing discriminatory policies against Chinese Indonesians, coupled with a history of “anti-Chinese” sentiments in Indonesia, are key reasons for this marked interest in Chinese Indonesians expressed by scholars, experts and researchers alike. An immediate trigger for this heightened attention was the dramatic outbursts of violence in different parts of Indonesia which accompanied Suharto’s downfall. The violence that took place was immediately ethnicized by the media as “anti-Chinese” (Heryanto 1999). It was disturbing to witness numerous instances of violence – including mass rapes – perpetrated against women of apparent Chinese descent. Reports of such violence hogged the headlines of both the local and global media for weeks, galvanizing numerous Chinese communities in different parts of the world into condemning the spectacle of “anti-Chinese” violence in a dramatic show of ethnic solidarity (Tay 2006).

The chapters in the book exemplify the expansiveness of the scholarship and, more significantly, they depict how scholars are moving beyond the adoption of a narrow ethno-nationalist framework in their research on Chinese Indonesians. This is evident in the recently published edited volume *Chinese Indonesians and Regime Change*, which problematizes the nation-state paradigm and the political economy approach, both central to studies of Chinese Indonesians, especially during the New Order period. The editors acknowledge that “so far only few attempts have been made to reassess these [approaches] in regard to the modern historiography of the Chinese Indonesians” (Dieleman, Koning and Post 2011: 6). The book departs from the state-centered perspective, which often presents the Chinese as disenfranchised victims, juxtaposed against a strong and oppressive state; and treats the Chinese as insiders, not outsiders, and as active agents, not as passive bystanders, in historical events.

Nonetheless, the discourse of “*Masalah Cina*,” otherwise known as the “Chinese Problem,” remains a major stumbling block in any attempt to reinvent this field. A key phrase in the nationalistic discourse on the ethnic Chinese and Chineseness in postcolonial Indonesia, “*Masalah Cina*” is popularly used in an unconscious manner, as a shorthand reference to a range of multi-faceted problems – whether historical, institutional, economic, racial, socio-cultural, or religious – that obstruct Chinese Indonesians from either identifying themselves or being identified fully as part of the Indonesian nation-state.

While existing scholarly literature demonstrates both an empathy and a critical awareness of the myriad ways in which the Chinese community has been discriminated against, victimized, or made scapegoats for the socio-economic problems afflicting the Indonesian nation, it is not always obvious that scholars make a sufficiently clear distinction between the complex problems Chinese Indonesians confront in becoming encompassed within Indonesia and the dominant discourse of *Masalah Cina*. This distinction is important to identify precisely the ideological work that *Masalah Cina* does in anchoring a particular discourse about

the Chinese and Chineseness in Indonesia. Casting the Chinese in the country as a “problem” on a “national” scale, the discourse of *Masalah Cina* not only abets the minorization of the Chinese, it reduces the long history of Chinese presence since pre-colonial times to a question of whether and how the Chinese can eventually fit into the Indonesian nation. Chinese Indonesians and Chineseness are therefore prefigured as a “national problem” to be checked, regulated and eventually overcome with artificial policies and solutions discussed below. The diagnostics of Indonesian nationalism therefore permeate the discourse of *Masalah Cina*. The entrenchment of an ethno-nationalist paradigm is further attested to by the evident difficulties in dislodging discussion of the Chinese or issues pertaining to Chineseness in Indonesia from *Masalah Cina*, even after May 1998.

It is necessary to account for as well as to explain the workings of the *Masalah Cina* discourse by shedding light on its historicity. This is mainly because the discourse performs multiple functions of erasure, including suppressing the historical circumstances of its own beginnings. Anti-Sinicism evidently has a history in Indonesia that predates 1945. However, as Pramodya Ananta Toer’s well-honed historical sense suggests, “what is surprising about anti-Chinese racism is this: why does it occur in an independent Indonesia?” (cited in Purdey 2003: 1). The *Masalah Cina* discourse problematizes the Chinese and Chineseness in Indonesia by collapsing the different dimensions of the historic presence of Chinese communities in the country into one alleged problem and solution with a convenient phraseology. The emergence and dissemination of this discourse, it must be emphasized, constitutes a historical event in and by itself. It heralded the beginnings of the New Order regime as the government undertook to implement a “comprehensive solution” to the “many-faceted Chinese problem” in the late 1960s (Coppel 1983: 29). In *Indonesian Chinese in Crisis*, Charles Coppel writes that although there was a sense in post-World War Two Indonesia that the Chinese residents, be they Indonesian citizens or otherwise, were felt to be “a problem,”¹ it was only in 1967 that the New Order government found it necessary to embark on an all-encompassing solution, and more importantly, possessed the capacity to enforce a coordinated policy when compared with the ad hoc way the presence of Chinese residents in post-war Indonesia was dealt with by earlier Indonesian central and regional authorities.

The New Order government’s total solution would eventually be laid out in a three-volume publication in the late 1970s that contained almost all the laws, regulations and policies relating to the Chinese in Indonesia under the macabre title *Guide to the Solution of the Chinese Problem in Indonesia* (Ind.: *Pedoman Penyelesaian Masalah Cina di Indonesia*) (Coppel 2002). The government’s solution basically involved compelling the Chinese to lose all traces of their Chineseness, which necessitated outright bans on nearly every aspect of what was seen as “Chinese tradition and culture,” including the Chinese language, Chinese schools, newspapers and other kinds of Chinese-language mass media. Chinese-language materials were not allowed into the country. The public use and display of Chinese characters were strictly forbidden. The number and type of Chinese organizations, or any group with large number of members who were of Chinese descent, were heavily circumscribed. Chinese-Indonesian citizens were