

Ethnic Chinese in  
Contemporary  
Indonesia



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# Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia

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CHINESE  
HERITAGE  
CENTRE



*Singapore*

and



INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

*Singapore*

First published in Singapore in 2008 by  
ISEAS Publications  
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies  
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Pasir Panjang  
Singapore 119614

*E-mail:* [publish@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:publish@iseas.edu.sg) • *Website:* [bookshop.iseas.edu.sg](http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg)

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**ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

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Ethnic chinese in contemporary Indonesia / edited by Leo Suryadinata.

1. Chinese—Indonesia.
2. Chinese—Indonesia—Politics and government.
3. Indonesia—Ethnic relations.
  - I. Suryadinata, Leo, 1941-.

DS632.3 C5E852                      2008

ISBN 978-981-230-834-4 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-230-835-1 (hard cover)

ISBN 978-981-230-836-8 (PDF)

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Typeset by International Typesetters Pte Ltd

Printed in Singapore by Utopia Press Pte Ltd

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# PREFACE

On 19 July 2007 the Chinese Heritage Centre (Singapore), Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Singapore), and NABIL Foundation (Indonesia) organized a joint one-day seminar on “Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia in an Era of Globalization” in Singapore. The purpose of the seminar was to provide comprehensive and up-to-date information on the topic to the educated layman in Singapore by fully examining the position of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia before and after the fall of Soeharto, with special reference to the post-Soeharto era.

To reach a wider audience, the organizers have decided to publish ten papers from the seminar. All of the papers have been extensively revised and they will be useful for readers who want to know the current situation of the Chinese in Indonesia.

I would like to thank the paper-writers for revising their papers and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Publications Unit for agreeing to publish these papers.

*Professor Leo Suryadinata*  
*Editor*



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# GLOSSARY

Cina	An old Indonesian/Malay term which was used to refer to the ethnic Chinese and China; it became derogatory in the twentieth century, especially after the Sino-Japanese War, in Indonesia. In 1967 the Soeharto regime adopted the term to replace Tionghoa (ethnic Chinese) and Tiongkok (China). See also Tionghoa.
Cukong	A Hokkien term ( <i>zhu gong</i> ) to refer to a boss. During the Soeharto period, it was used to refer to a Chinese businessman who collaborated with a government high official, including military generals.
Era Reformasi (or Reform Era)	A term used to refer to the post-Soeharto era.
Imlek	This term is often used together with Tahun Baru Imlek in Indonesian, which means Lunar New Year. It is also called “Chinese New Year”.
New Order (or <i>Orde Baru</i> in Indonesian)	A term used to refer to the Soeharto period (1965–98).
Old Order (or <i>Orde Lama</i> in Indonesian)	A term used to refer to the Sukarno period (1957–65).
Pembauran	Originally means “mixing”, sometime it is also used to mean “assimilation” by some Indonesians.
Peranakan	An Indonesian/Malay term which originally refers to the descendants of mixed marriages between foreign males and Indonesian/Malay females. In the nineteenth century in Indonesia the term <i>Cina</i>

	<i>Peranakan</i> is used to refer to Chinese Muslims and in the present day usage, it refers to the descendants of old established Chinese who are local born and speak Indonesian/Malay or a local dialect in their daily life. It is also a form of self-identification.
Pribumi (Pri)	An Indonesian term which refers to the indigenous population.
Non-Pribumi (non-Pri)	A phrase used in Indonesia to refer to non-indigenous people, usually it means ethnic Chinese Indonesians.
Tionghoa	A Hokkian term to refer to the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. It was popularly before the New Order. But the Soeharto regime abolished the term and replaced it with a derogatory term Cina for the ethnic Chinese and China. It is now becoming popular again among the <i>totoks</i> and some <i>peranakans</i> . See also Cina.
Totok	An Indonesian term which originally means pure blood; in the twentieth century, it was used to refer to the new Chinese migrants to Indonesia who were foreign born and were culturally still Chinese. In the present day usage, it refers to the migrant Chinese or their immediate descendants who still speak (some) Chinese. It is comparable to <i>Sinkeh</i> or <i>Singkeh</i> .
SBKRI	Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Indonesia, or the document proving the Indonesian citizenship. This document was required by the Indonesian authorities to prove their citizen status before applying for passport and other official documents.
Sinkeh (Singkeh)	Literally means “new guest” ( <i>xinke</i> ) in Chinese. See also totok.
Undang-Undang Dasar 1945 (UUD 1945)	The 1945 Indonesian Constitution, which is also a current constitution; it has been amended four times since the fall of Soeharto to make it more democratic.
WNI (Warganegara Indonesia, Indonesian citizens)	This term is often used to refer to Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent as “indigenous Indonesians” are automatically Indonesian citizens.

# 1

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## **CHINESE INDONESIANS IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION: SOME MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS**

Leo Suryadinata

Indonesia is the largest country in Southeast Asia, and the absolute number of Indonesian Chinese was believed to be the largest in the region; that is, between three and five per cent. Recent studies based on the census show that the number is not as large as previously estimated (between 1.5 and 2 per cent), but it is still large enough for them to play a significant role in various fields, especially in the economic, social, and cultural fields, if not in the political field.

Due to political and economic reasons, the Chinese in Indonesia became the target of mob violence in May 1998, when anti-Chinese riots were rampant with looting, raping, and killing taking place. This May tragedy shocked the world. However, with the fall of Soeharto, the conditions of the Chinese in Indonesia have vastly improved, and many are of the view that they never enjoyed such a position in the Indonesian recent history. What are the real position and conditions of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia?

As I see it, the Chinese in Indonesia have the following major characteristics.

### **Heterogeneity of the Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia**

Chinese Indonesians are not a homogeneous group. They are divided by culture, political orientations, economic background, and citizenship.

Culturally, the Chinese were divided in the past into locally born, Indonesian-speaking *peranakans* and foreign born Chinese-speaking *totoks*. But nowadays the absolute majority is either *peranakans* or peranakanized *totoks*. In terms of religion, some are either Buddhists, Confucians, or the followers of a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism; some are Christians, and others are Muslims. Politically, they are divided into pro-Jakarta, pro-Beijing and pro-Taipei, but the majority is pro-Jakarta. Economically, they are also divided into upper class, middle class, and the lower class, and it appears that the middle class forms the majority. In terms of citizenship, they are divided into Indonesian citizens and foreigners, with the majority holding Indonesian citizenship.

Despite the heterogeneous nature of the Chinese community, the Indonesian authorities in the past, if not now, considered them a homogeneous group. They regarded the ethnic Chinese to be loyal to China (especially Beijing), not to Jakarta. They considered the Chinese a “foreign minority” who should become part of the indigenous population through total assimilation. This is particularly the case during Soeharto’s rule.

## LEGACY OF THE SOEHARTO ERA

Soeharto’s Assimilation Policy: The thirty-two years of Soeharto rule has had a major impact on the Chinese in Indonesia. The three pillars of Chinese culture were eradicated: Chinese schools were closed down, Chinese mass media were banned, and ethnic Chinese organizations were dissolved. In addition, the name-changing policy was introduced. Chinese Indonesians were advised to change their names into Indonesian names. What is an Indonesian name? Anything as long as it is non-Chinese.

Indigenous Indonesian nation: During the Soeharto era, the ethnic Chinese were expected to be absorbed into an Indonesian nation, defined by the government as the *pribumi* (indigenes)-based nation. To become members of this “indigenous nation”, the Chinese Indonesians were expected to abandon their “Chinese-ness”. To a large extent, a large number of Chinese Indonesians have been Indonesianized, if not indigenized. Put differently, many *totok* Chinese, especially their children, have been peranakanized, while peranakan Chinese have been further Indonesianized.

The Soeharto government intentionally confined the Chinese to the economic sector and made it difficult for them to enter other sectors. As a result, the Chinese have inadvertently become richer, and their economic power has become stronger. During the New Order, one could find Chinese economic elite, but no Chinese political elite, meaning, ethnic Chinese



political leaders. Those Chinese who were interested in politics could only join three New Order political parties or “broker-type” organizations. These political leaders did not represent Chinese Indonesians. Not surprisingly, after the fall of Soeharto, there were no recognized Chinese political leaders who could lead ethnic Chinese-dominated parties.

## ETHNIC CHINESE ORGANIZATIONS

The fall of Soeharto has given rise to three Chinese cultural pillars: Chinese organizations (both ethnic political parties and ethnic Chinese NGOs, Chinese clan and alumni associations etc.); Chinese Mass Media (*Guoji Ribao* and six other Chinese dailies); Chinese education.

Let us first examine Chinese organizations, both political and NGOs. Almost immediately after Soeharto’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).

Soon after its establishment, the Partai Pembauran Indonesia was dissolved due to a lack of support; Parti is also a political party only on paper as it could not participate in either the 1999 or 2004 general elections; this was because it failed to fulfil the requirements of the General Election Committee. Only the PBI took part in the 1999 election and won a seat in the national parliament and a number of provincial parliamentary seats in West Kalimantan and Riau. The party was soon divided and a new Chinese-based political party, the Partai Perjuangan Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (PPBT), was established, that competed with the PBI. Nevertheless, both the PBI and PPBT were unable to contest the 2004 election as both did not meet the requirements of the General Election Committee. The ethnic party approach has failed and many Chinese Indonesians have adopted a non-ethnic Chinese party approach to assume political positions, especially at the national level. One of the major reasons is that Chinese Indonesians form a very small percentage (about 2 per cent) of the population, and they are also heterogeneous in their cultural and political orientations. Moreover, the thirty-two years of Soeharto rule have eliminated Chinese political leaders, with only economic elites surviving during the New Order.

As Chinese Indonesians are ideologically and culturally divided, some ethnic Chinese disagreed with the establishment of ethnic Chinese political parties; instead, they set up non-party Chinese organizations. The first Chinese Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) formed was the Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia (PSMTI, known as *Yinhua*

*Baijiaxing Xiehui*). Later, the organization split up and a new NGO, known as Perhimpunan Keturunan Tionghoa Indonesia (abbreviated as INTI or *Huayi Zonghui*), 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. Among Chinese NGOs, the most important are the PMSTI and INTI. Both were established in Jakarta, but they have numerous branches in major cities all over Indonesia.

The post-Soeharto era has also witnessed the rise of Chinese clan associations. Almost every major clan such as Hokkien, Hockchia, Hakka, and Cantonese associations have been revived, and some clans, for instance, the Hakka, have three rival associations competing to represent the dialect group. According to one source, there are more than 400 ethnic Chinese associations, including many clan associations, in Indonesia. But it is worth noting that these clan associations are small in terms of membership and that their members come from the older rather than younger generation.

It should be pointed out that after the fall of Soeharto, one can see the emergence of the *peranakanized totoks* who have been involved in politics. For instance, Nurdin Purnomo (Wu Nengbin) and Susanto T. L. (Lin Guanyu), are *peranakanized totoks*; they are different from the pre-Soeharto Chinese politicians who were *peranakan* in their background. These *peranakanized totoks* are bilingual in that they still speak Chinese dialects, but are able to speak Indonesian as well. Many were Chinese-educated, or received some Chinese education up to junior or senior school level.

Due to the small number of Chinese Indonesians and their divided political orientations, no ethnic Chinese party was able to win the election in Indonesia. As stated earlier, many Chinese Indonesians have abandoned the “ethnic approach” to politics and adopted the “non-ethnic approach”. They joined the *pribumi*-dominated political parties and were able to become members of parliament. It is also quite obvious that more Chinese Indonesians are now participating in politics, especially at the local level. Many Chinese Indonesians have become local parliamentary members and a few have become district chiefs through the election process.

## CHINESE EDUCATION AND CHINESE LANGUAGE TEACHING

The fall of Soeharto is also a watershed for Chinese education. Following globalization and democratization, the new government of Indonesia permitted the revival of Chinese education. However, this has not been

followed by the re-emergence of pre-Soeharto, full-fledged Chinese-medium schools. The reasons are complex.

There have been significant social changes in the New Order. The Chinese community has been Indonesianized. *Totok* children have been *peranakanized* and have lost their command of the Chinese language. Furthermore, Chinese Indonesians have become attracted to the English language. Well-to-do Chinese send their children mainly to Singapore and the West for their education. Children of those less well-off have continued their education within Indonesia. As such, the Chinese have been integrated into the Indonesian system. Even the Batam International University, which was established after the fall of Soeharto, was an Indonesian-medium university specializing in IT and business. No Chinese studies department has been set up in the university.

It should be noted that after the fall of Soeharto, some Chinese Indonesians, especially those who were ex-graduates of Chinese-medium schools, were eager to re-establish the pre-Soeharto schools. These Chinese-school alumni are economically well-off and would like to see the re-emergence of such schools in Indonesia. To my knowledge, there were numerous discussions within ex-Chinese school alumni associations in Jakarta and elsewhere on this subject, but no agreement was reached. Many Chinese Indonesians, including those ex-Chinese school graduates, encountered difficulties in re-establishing such schools. First of all, the Chinese society in Indonesia has been Indonesianized or *peranakanized*, and they have different educational needs. The pre-Soeharto education environment no longer exists. Even those Chinese who were Chinese-educated during the pre-Soeharto era have become Indonesian citizens and their children have received Indonesian and English education.

These Chinese Indonesians recognize that to live in Indonesia, they need to adapt to the Indonesian situation. Pre-Soeharto Chinese schools will have difficulty in attracting students as the majority of Chinese Indonesian children no longer speak and write Chinese. Finding teachers and textbooks will also be problematic. Many have eventually decided to establish trilingual schools where Mandarin, Indonesian and English are all taught in the curriculum. These schools are mainly primary schools and their standard of Chinese language is not high. There is the hope that after many years, these school children will be proficient in three languages and will form the backbone of the Chinese Indonesian community. According to one researcher, there are at least fifty such trilingual schools in Jakarta alone.

As a matter of fact, the so-called trilingual schools can be divided into National Plus Schools and International Curriculum Schools.

### ***National Plus Schools***

Let us first look at the National Plus schools which form the majority of such schools.

As stated earlier, during the Soeharto era, all schools in Indonesia, whether public or private, were national schools. With the exception of the Special Project National Schools (SPNS) which existed from 1968 to 1975, all schools in Indonesia were not permitted to teach Chinese as an extra-curricular subject. The fall of Soeharto has seen the rise of the so-called National Plus schools, which is slightly different from the SPNS in the sense that the teaching of Chinese is integrated into the curriculum. Nevertheless, only about four hours a week are given to the teaching of Chinese language as a subject.

In fact, the curriculum of these schools is identical to that of the national schools, except that Chinese language is offered as a subject. There were not enough local Chinese-language teachers and a few Chinese-language teachers were recruited from China. I visited one such school in Jakarta (Bukit Mulia Indah) which is sponsored by the Fuzhou Association. The school is a National Plus school, first established in 1993 as a primary school.<sup>1</sup> In 2002, the restriction on the teaching of Chinese was relaxed and the demand for Chinese language learning increased. In response, the Bukit Mulia Indah School opened extra-curricular Chinese classes for children and adults, with Chinese teachers directly employed from China.<sup>2</sup> It was reported that the response from the local Chinese community was encouraging.

### ***International Curriculum Schools***

During the New Order, Soeharto only allowed international schools to be established for embassy children. However, towards the end of the New Order, he permitted the Taiwanese community in Jakarta to set up an international school, especially for Taiwanese children, using Mandarin as the medium of instruction. Local Chinese were not allowed to attend this. However, after the end of the New Order, there was liberalization of international-curriculum schools, and these schools were established by both Indonesians and foreigners. The most well-known are perhaps the Jakarta International School and the so-called Nasional High (which is affiliated with the Chinese High School in Singapore). These two international schools use English as the medium of instruction, but also offer the Chinese language and Indonesian. Chinese Indonesians are allowed to study in these schools and after graduation they can continue their studies in Western universities.

Students of these two schools are either foreigners, or they come from well-to-do Chinese Indonesian families. They can afford to pay the high fees charged at these schools. It is also interesting to note that even the Taiwanese school in Jakarta is allowed to take in Chinese Indonesian students after the fall of Soeharto.

### ***Chinese Language Learning Centres***

In fact, a large number of the so-called Chinese schools in Jakarta are “Chinese Language Learning Centres” rather than regular schools. These centres teach Chinese to children and adults, and their number has rapidly increased after the fall of Soeharto. In major cities such as Jakarta and Surabaya, such centres are growing in number in major shopping malls which Chinese Indonesians often visit. They recruit teachers from China and even have links with colleges or universities in mainland China. They often organize groups to study the Chinese language or to improve their Mandarin in mainland China. I have visited a few shopping centres in Peluit and Muara Karang (both in Jakarta) where such centres operate.

### ***Chinese as a Foreign Language in State-run National Schools***

The most important achievement for Chinese Indonesians is their success in getting Chinese to be taught as a foreign language in Indonesian state-run schools and ethnic Indonesian-run schools. This is a significant development as during the New Order, the Chinese language and characters were banned. The fall of Soeharto has changed the linguistic landscape of Indonesia. The Chinese language is permitted to be taught in state-run secondary schools.

The initiative was taken by an organization called “National Coordinating Body for Mandarin Education” (Badan Koordinasi Pendidikan Bahasa Mandarin, BKPBM), which was set up by Chinese-educated Chinese Indonesians on 18 January 2004.<sup>3</sup> This was originally a small committee which coordinated Chinese-language teachers in Indonesia. It was first formed in April 2001 and it helped organize Chinese-language examinations for Chinese-language teachers in Indonesia. When it was transformed into the Coordinating Body, it began to cooperate closely with the Indonesian Ministry of Education. This Coordinating Body is now chaired by Kakan Sukandadinata (Yang Jianqiang), a leading Chinese businessman who was a graduate of the *Chung Hua Chung Hsueh* (Hua Chung) in Jakarta prior to the New Order. This Body is in charge of coordinating Mandarin seminars

and assists in the training of local Chinese-language teachers. It also liaises between the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Hanban of the People's Republic of China (PRC). As Indonesia badly needs qualified Chinese-language teachers, and there are not enough local Chinese teachers, many Chinese Indonesians are sent to China for training; Hanban (the executive body of the Chinese Language Council International) also sends Chinese teachers to ease the shortage in Indonesia.

It is interesting to note that Hanban has helped to establish Confucius Institutes overseas in recent years to teach the Chinese language and culture, but no such institute has been set up in Indonesia as Confucianism is regarded as a Chinese Indonesian religion (*Agama Konghucu*). If this institute were to be set up, people might think China is promoting Confucian religion in Indonesia.

The teaching of Chinese in Indonesia has just started and it is still too early to judge if this will be successful. Some Chinese Indonesians have taken this opportunity to promote Mandarin. However, due to the importance of English and Indonesian, they would like to promote three languages at the same time. This is not easy but it has become a fashion now in Indonesia to have trilingual schools or trilingual education.

## CHINESE LANGUAGE MEDIA

After Soeharto stepped down, one of the Chinese cultural pillars, Chinese newspapers, has also been revived. Initially, Chinese periodicals were published to meet the demands of the Chinese educated. Gradually, Chinese dailies also emerged, mainly in major cities such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Medan. The most well-known Chinese dailies are *Guoji Ribao*, *Yindunixiya Shang Bao*, *Heping Ribao*, *Shijie Ribao*, and *Qiandao Ribao*. The first four are published in Jakarta while the last one is in Surabaya.

It should be noted that the post-Soeharto Chinese newspapers tend to be “multinational”, as they are linked to foreign newspapers. For instance, *Guoji Ribao* is linked to the American *Guoji Ribao*, while *Shijie Ribao* is linked to Taiwan's *Shijie Ribao*. The ex-Indonesian military controlled newspaper, *Yindunishiya Ribao* (Harian Indonesia), has also recently been purchased by the Malaysian *Sin Chew Jit Poh* (Xingzhou Ribao) and has become *Yinni Xingzhou Ribao*.

It is also worth noting that the control of foreign newspapers in Indonesia has been relaxed, and even Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong Chinese newspapers are distributed freely in Indonesia. For instance, *Guoji Ribao* of Jakarta also carries the overseas editions of *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily

of the PRC) and *Wen Wei Po* (Wenhui Bao of Hong Kong). These two mainland Chinese newspapers were distributed together with *Guoji Ribao* as its “supplements”.

The competition among Chinese dailies has been very keen and only a few newspapers can survive. The largest newspaper at the moment is *Guoji Ribao*, which publishes around 30,000 copies per day. However, due to the shortage of readers, writers, and advertisements, many Chinese dailies have been forced to close down, the cases in point being *Long Yang Ribao* in Surabaya, and *Xin Shenghuo Bao* and *Shijie Ribao* in Jakarta. The last one was the most recent casualty.

The size of the Chinese newspaper readership is declining and many are worried about the future of Chinese-language dailies. It has been suggested that Chinese dailies face three challenges: shortage of readers, newspapermen, and funds.<sup>4</sup> This is due to the closure of Chinese schools in Indonesia and the suppression of Chinese culture in general during the Soeharto era. Readers are mainly older Chinese who had gone to Chinese-medium schools prior to the Soeharto period; meanwhile young Chinese readers have not emerged. The only source of new readership is made up of new Chinese migrants (*Zhongguo xin yimin*) who are still small in number.

Chinese-language television station has also emerged. The most well-known is *Metro Xinwen* (Metro News) in Jakarta which broadcasts in Mandarin. This is affiliated with *Media Indonesia* and the broadcasting hours are limited.

## ETHNIC CHINESE RELIGIONS

In fact, there is another Chinese cultural pillar, or the fourth pillar, which is often forgotten, that is, ethnic Chinese religions.

The Confucian Religion (Matakin), which was de-recognized by the Soeharto regime in 1979, also gained prominence after the fall of Soeharto. 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 Majelis Tinggi Agama Khonghucu Indonesia (Matakin). Wahid also abrogated the Presidential Decision no. 14/1967, which prohibited Chinese Indonesians from celebrating Chinese festivals in public.<sup>5</sup> On 31 March 2000, his Minister for Home Affairs, Surjadi, issued a new instruction (no. 477/805/Sj) repealing the 1978 Circular (Surat Edaran) which recognized only five religions, excluding Confucianism.<sup>6</sup> During the Megawati presidency, she moved one step further to declare Lunar New Year Day, which is often known as Chinese New Year