

National Identity or Transnational Identity: Theoretical Approaches to the Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia

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Introduction

The Chinese in Indonesia

Indonesia consists of over 13,000 islands which stretch for more than 5000 kilometres: roughly the distance from London to Baghdad (Schwarz 1999: 5). Hundreds of ethnic groups live on these islands, and the "problem" of Indonesian nationhood has been a problem of maintaining "unity in diversity" (Kahn 1998: 13). The Dutch controlled the East Indies from the early seventeenth century until the early twentieth century without much difficulty. A nationalist movement developed in the early twentieth century, firstly among students from the East Indies studying in the Netherlands, and subsequently throughout the rest of the population. Independence was won in 1949.

There are approximately six million ethnic Chinese in In-

onesia, out of a population of 200 million. They are a diverse group which Leo Suryadinata has divided into *peranakan* and *totok* (Suryadinata 1998b). *Peranakan* Chinese are older settlers who have partly assimilated into Indonesian society. The *totok* are first- or second-generation Chinese. According to Suryadinata, "in the eyes of most indigenous Indonesians, as long as the ethnic Chinese have not been completely absorbed into indigenous society, the 'Chinese problem' will remain" (Suryadinata 1998b).

Although the Suharto administration (1965-1998) asserted that its objective was the complete assimilation of the ethnic-Chinese into indigenous society, it continued to differentiate between indigenous and non-indigenous groups based on descent. For example, the identity cards of the ethnic Chinese have special codes to distinguish them from the rest of the population; and in order to renew a passport, Chinese Indonesians must submit proof of citizenship of deceased parents, which non-Chinese Indonesians are not required to do (Cohen 2000). Since the fall of Suharto and the instigation of the government of Abdurrahman Wahid (President) and Megawati Sukarnoputri (vice-president) in 1999, there have been calls to repeal such discriminatory laws. The ethnic Chinese are becoming more involved in politics, and they are permitted to express their Chinese identity more openly than they had been during the Suharto era.¹

Aims

In this paper I will explore some of the debates about national and transnational identities and relate them to ethnic Chinese Indonesians: how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by other Indonesians. This will involve the investigation of Indonesian national identity, particularly the concept of "unity in diversity", which is one of the main tenets on which the Indonesian nation is based. On a broader level the study is concerned with exploring how multiethnic societies can be constituted in order that all citizens, including minorities, play an active role, and a diversity of identities are accepted within the national culture.

Larry Diamond and Marc Plattner suggest that ethnicity is the most difficult type of cleavage for a democracy to manage because "the conflicts it generates are intrinsically less amenable to compromise than those revolving around material issues [such as class or occupation]" (Diamond and Plattner, 1994: xviii-xix). Since Indonesia is a new democracy, it will be interesting to examine this issue of minority rights within the broader theory of democratisation. I will also explore the concept of a Chinese transnational identity: whether the Chinese Indonesians can be seen as fitting within a global "Chinese" identity - or would want to. There is a question mark over how engaged Chinese Indonesians are with the

¹ This year, for the first time since Soeharto came to power, ethnic Chinese were allowed to celebrate Chinese New Year without needing a permit. I will look at this again in the section entitled 'The Chinese in Indonesia'.

wider debate on Chinese identity.

This paper may appear to be quite basic, however, at this stage in my research I am merely setting out some primary questions for further discussion and study.

Significance

The fate of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia is emerging as an important subject in Indonesian studies. Since the fall of the Suharto regime in May 1998 Indonesian society has undergone major changes. There is a debate emerging, within civil society, about the nature of Indonesian identity, and how the society should be constituted; for example, whether Indonesia should be federal or unitary; whether ethnic and cultural differences should be suppressed for the national good, or whether diversity should be celebrated, as part of the national identity of the country).

The Chinese in Indonesia are also engaging in this debate. The anti-Communist purge, which brought Suharto to power in 1965, ensured that the Chinese (who were labelled as communists by the new government) were left out of politics for the next thirty years. In 1998 the Indonesian Chinese Reform Party was established, and the ethnic Chinese are also becoming more involved in the work of NGO's such as The Chinese Indonesian Association (Cohen 2000). Although the political situation in Indonesia is still volatile, the ethnic Chinese are beginning to assert themselves in the political and cultural spheres to a greater extent than they have in the past thirty-five years. Ariel Heryanto has suggested that "the status and identity of the ethnic Chinese in the post-Suharto era will never be the same again" (Heryanto 1999: 329).

These changes have implications for the future development of Indonesian society. The national motto "unity in diversity" has been called into question in recent years. The changes in the way the Chinese are treated, and how they are perceived, will help us to explain the type of society Indonesia will be in the future. Suharto believed that ethnic difference needed to be stamped out in order to keep Indonesia from socially fragmenting. In post-Suharto Indonesia, public displays of ethnic and cultural differences are permitted to a greater extent. These new policies are still in their infancy, however, and the broader study of which this is a part will explore this shift in the cultural and political life of the country.

The broader concerns of this study are minority rights, and how diverse ethnic identities can be celebrated within the national culture have wide implications, since most countries in the modern world are heterogeneous, and most encounter difficulties in this area. With the "disintegration of [former communist] nation states into ethnic civil war" since the end of the Cold War (Ignatieff 1994: 2), this problem has become more visible. A sizeable literature has been published on minorities and minority rights, but it has tended to focus on western liberal democracies. By investigating the

ethnic Chinese minority in Indonesia I hope to move the debate away from such a "western-centric" viewpoint. (This will enrich the theoretical discussions of the general issue, and by examining the Indonesian situation, we may find new ways to deal with the problems.)

Issues of national identity and minority rights are also important in the light of the continuing debate about "globalisation". Scholars are debating questions about the future to the nation-state, and the rise of ethnic tensions around the world. The Chinese in Indonesia fit into this debate in a very interesting way. On the one hand, they are perceived (perhaps by themselves, and by others) as being part of a larger community of ethnic Chinese all over the world, and on the other hand, they are also exploring their identity as Indonesians.

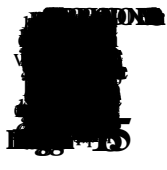
It is an appropriate time to investigate Chinese transnational identity, after the anti-Chinese violence which erupted in Indonesia in 1998. Leo Suryadinata links anti-Chinese feeling in Indonesia to a suspicion by the indigenous population that the loyalties of the ethnic Chinese do not lie with the Indonesian nation. Initially, according to Suryadinata (1998b), they were regarded as pro-Dutch (and with the emergence of Chinese nationalism in the early decades of the twentieth century they were also considered pro-Chinese). After independence they were perceived as exploiters of the "poor Indonesian masses", and subsequently they were considered to be communists or communist sympathisers. With the rapid economic growth in Asia in the latter half of the twentieth century, the indigenous population was suspicious of their international trade links, and their investment in the People's Republic of China (Suryadinata 1998b).

Literature review

I will begin my theoretical investigation by examining the literature on nationalism. There is very little agreement among scholars on this complicated subject. I have concentrated my study on the main thinkers in the modernist camp? There are two reasons for this: firstly, the modernist thinkers have dominated the theory of nationalism since the 1950s, when the imperialist powers left the colonies, and new nations were developed in Asia and Africa; secondly, Indonesia itself is a 'new' nation, so this theory is useful for my investigation of Indonesian nationalism. However, as part of my continuing research, I will also read the literature on "ethno-symbolism". People such as Anthony Smith, John Armstrong and John Hutchinson argue that modernist scholars fail to take into consideration pre-existing ethnic ties, and the continuing importance of earlier myths, traditions and values in the establishment and cohesion of nations.

² The modernist are those who assert that nations are modern phenomena, with the earliest dating from around the time of the enlightenment.

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