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Reassessing Chinese Indonesian stereotypes: two decades after Reformasi

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ABSTRACT

Historically, the Chinese community in Indonesia has been stereotyped as exclusive of the ‘indigenous’ social group; hardworking and industrious but frugal; and apolitical or lacking nationalistic spirit towards their ‘host country’, Indonesia. This paper aims to review, interrogate and re-examine the relevance of such stereotypes twenty years after the fall of President Suharto in 1998. Drawing on fresh qualitative interview data collected in 2016 and early 2017, we critically examine the stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians’ exclusiveness, their lack of nationalistic spirit and apolitical attitude, and we present a nuanced discussion of the complexity and evolution of the perceptions of non-Chinese towards the Chinese Indonesians in contemporary Indonesia. The study confirms the continuation of old stereotypes but also points out some changes in attitudes as a result of the post-1998 reform and liberalization of Chinese culture and identity.

KEYWORDS

Chinese Indonesians; stereotypes; Indonesia; ethnic minority; racial politics

During the past few years, with increasingly heated political conditions in Indonesia due to official elections for President and other high functionaries and the active involvement of several Chinese Indonesians in the political constellation, observers have been wondering if the position of Chinese Indonesians has changed. The Chinese Indonesian community has taken a different view of political participation and citizenship rights in the reformation era since the fall of Suharto’s New Order. This new sociopolitical development calls for a reconsideration of the common stereotypes of the ethnic Chinese, which have been constructed and reconstructed since the coming of the early Chinese migrants to the archipelago. Various stereotypes accorded to this community, which this article will discuss, have been deeply embedded in the psyche of many ordinary Indonesians.

Aris Ananta et al.’s (2015) survey of the demography of Indonesia’s ethnicity revealed a decline in the percentage of the Chinese Indonesian population, from 2.03% in 1930 to 1.5% in 2000 (i.e. 2.83 million). This constituted a drop from being the sixth largest ethnic group in Indonesia in 1930 to the twelfth in 2000. The authors suggest that there were three reasons for this decline: first, there was considerable migration out of Indonesia.
due to the political situation in Indonesia, such as the anti-Communist movements in the mid-1960s and the anti-Chinese riots of 1998. The second reason is a low fertility rate among the Chinese Indonesians. The third is that some of them did not choose to become Indonesian citizens (Ananta et al. 2015, 238) when such an option was available after Indonesia gained independence from the Netherlands. It is also argued that many Chinese Indonesians were more comfortable identifying themselves with local ethnic groups than with their cultural identity (Ananta et al. 2015; Coppel 2017). The historical trajectory of assimilation and acculturation is reflected in how the present Chinese descendants express their Chineseness in their everyday life in contemporary Indonesia.

Before the 1965 coup attempt, also known as the G30S movement, Chinese Indonesians were broadly divided into two camps in their views on how this ethnic group should be accommodated in postcolonial Indonesia: those who favoured integration, led by Baperki (the Indonesian Citizenship Consultative Body), and those who favoured assimilation, as promoted by LPKB (Lembaga Pembina Kesatuan Bangsa/Institute for the Promotion of National Unity) (Purdey 2006). The G30S movement gave rise to a new political era known as the ‘New Order’ led by General Suharto. The New Order administration banned Baperki and implemented a military-backed assimilation policy to systematically erase the Chinese identity from the nation by shutting down Chinese schools, organizations and media, and forcing Chinese Indonesians to change their names to Indonesian-sounding names (Hoon 2008). A string of discriminatory policies, issued in the form of presidential decrees, ensued, including the prohibition of the display of Chinese characters and importation of Chinese publications, in addition to repression of manifestation of Chinese beliefs, customs and traditions, such as the public celebration of Chinese New Year.

Although the assimilation policy aimed at removing the ‘foreignness’ of the Chinese Indonesians, it was never meant to totally indigenize them; their Otherness was constantly reproduced and strategically manipulated for the ends of the regime. Hence, ethnic violence still occurred when circumstances were appropriate. A new status quo was established where economically successful Chinese Indonesians could be manipulated, but put in a vulnerable position in need of the government’s protection. Meanwhile, the stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians being rich, shrewd, greedy and lacking in nationalism were propagated by the media. Hence, anti-Chinese sentiments were kept alive in the psyche of common Indonesians. All these made it challenging for Chinese Indonesians to claim a sense of belonging to Indonesia. Meanwhile, their cultural identity gradually diminished as they were forced to abandon their Chinese names, cultural heritage, language and traditions.

The 1998 riots that forced Suharto to step down were a traumatic experience for many Chinese Indonesians, which left them with deep and enduring wounds. The violent attacks and the sexual assaults on Chinese Indonesian women (Andajani-Sutjahjo, Bennett, and Davies 2018), which have never been legally disclosed, confirmed that anti-Chinese sentiment could easily be ignited (Purdey 2006). Nonetheless, the damage caused by the tragedy resulted in a turning point of the lives of Chinese Indonesians. Ignatius Wibowo (2001) noted that Chinese Indonesians variously responded to the tragedy by leaving Indonesia, by expressing their voice or by being loyal in staying and accepting it as their fate. After the fall of Suharto in 1998, the new government under President Habibie tried to make amends by urging Chinese Indonesians who had fled to return,
and assured them of their safety in Indonesia. A host of discriminatory ordinances were repealed by successive governments as Indonesia underwent Reformasi and democratization. This led to the revival of Chinese language and culture, the establishment of cultural and political organizations founded by Chinese Indonesians, the opening of Chinese Departments in several universities in Indonesia and the publication of Chinese newspapers (see Hoon 2008; Hoon and Kuntjara 2019). Some Chinese Indonesians participated in the cultural 'euphoria' as a matter of nostalgia, others wanted to bring about change in the way Chinese Indonesians were treated, by exercising their citizenship rights in the democratizing Indonesia.

Apparently Chinese Indonesians have learned that their long silence, conditioned under the Suharto regime, must change. The political involvement of Chinese Indonesian organizations shows their commitment to participation in Indonesian public affairs. In recent years, the running of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as Ahok) for the Jakarta Gubernatorial elections and the founding by Chinese Indonesian magnate Hary Tanoesosediho of the political party Perindo are evidence of the eagerness of Chinese Indonesians to participate in politics. This phenomenon suggests that Chinese Indonesians today have moved on from the fear of getting involved in politics; they have understood that their earlier perceived submissiveness and silence made them easy targets in the 1998 riots.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to review and interrogate the relevance of various stereotypes about Chinese Indonesians, twenty years after the fall of President Suharto in 1998. Drawing on fresh qualitative interview data collected in 2016 and early 2017, we critically examine the stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians' exclusiveness, their lack of nationalistic spirit and their apolitical attitude. It presents a nuanced picture of the complexity and evolution of the perceptions of non-Chinese towards the Chinese Indonesians in contemporary Indonesia. The study corroborates the continuation of the old stereotypes but also highlights some changes in attitudes as a result of the post-1998 reform and liberalization of Chinese culture and identity.

Stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians: continuity and change

A popular old stereotype that considered Chinese Indonesians as apolitical was typically expressed in the saying, ‘They don’t mind who holds the cow as long as they can milk it’ (Coppel 1983). This community was seen as interested only in making profits and not in making any commitment to national interests through political participation. Indeed, many Chinese Indonesians have considered that participating in politics is dangerous and purposeless, while being successful in business may render them and their family a prosperous and secure life.

Chinese Indonesians are also commonly perceived as exclusive and unwilling to mix with non-Chinese, especially in their area of residence (Coppel 1983). Non-Chinese Indonesians argue that this exclusiveness arises from a sense of superiority that the ethnic Chinese hold over other races, which is often seen as arrogance (Hoon 2008). There are various factors that account for their difficulty in integrating into local society. For example, many Chinese Indonesians have historically lived in pecinan ('Chinatowns'), found in big cities in Indonesia, where the concentration of Chinese residents is high. Many of the totok (Indonesian-born ethnic Chinese who remain oriented towards
Chinese culture) who live in pecinan still speak in Mandarin or a Chinese dialect at home, and preserve practices of Chinese tradition. Exclusiveness also happens through their choice of schools for their children. Chinese Indonesian parents tend to prefer a private school, often affiliated with Christianity or having a student body that is majority Chinese Indonesian, over a public school where they are a minority (see Hoon 2011).

Another stereotype that is often directed towards Chinese Indonesians is their alleged lack of nationalism. The fact that many Chinese Indonesians are reluctant to take part in politics, or to discuss political issues, can be regarded as indicating a lack of nationalistic spirit. The low numbers of Chinese Indonesians in the national armed forces can also be seen as reluctance to be involved in national defence. This is despite the fact that there are several high profile Chinese Indonesians who are known for their involvement in defending Indonesia from foreign threats, such as Admiral John Lie, who was recognized as a National Hero in 2009 for his services to Indonesia (Santosa 2014). In general, besides official discrimination that has made it difficult for them to enlist, joining the armed forces is not a favourable career for most Chinese Indonesians. Iwan Santosa argues that stereotypes perpetuated through folklore and name-calling—such as the pejorative term ‘Cino’—have contributed to their lack of self-confidence to be soldiers. Furthermore, most Chinese are convinced that institutional discriminatory practices impose a glass ceiling that prevents them attaining a high position in the military.

The study of Chinese Indonesian stereotypes has been continuously revisited by scholars since Charles Coppel’s monograph (1983), especially following the 1998 anti-Chinese riots. Chang-Yau Hoon’s (2008) study of Chinese identity in post-Suharto Indonesia in 2004 discussed how non-Chinese informants in Jakarta perceived Chinese Indonesians’ stereotypes in terms of their racial differences. He argued that ‘the boundary of difference between the pribumi and Chinese is imagined and maintained through perpetuating stereotypes and myths of racial characteristics’ (144). Hoon found that such differences may form the dualism wherein Chinese Indonesians are seen as oppressors and pribumi (or non-Chinese) as victims, which neglects the complexity of power relations. Indeed, race refers to biological differences, and the meanings attached to such difference are socially constructed and are always a result of politics and power (Storey 2012). As Paul Gilroy (2002) points out, race has to be socially and politically constructed to produce different forms of ‘racialization’. The fact that Hoon’s study was conducted just a few years after the 1998 tragedy means that the emotions were still raw and the collective memories of the trauma among his informants might have been constructed in racial terms rather than considered as a broader conflict of power. Our present study is interested in how Chinese stereotypes have evolved two decades after the 1998 riots, particularly among the younger generation who were either born after the riots or were too young to remember the atrocious events.

Johanes Herlijanto’s study in 2016 of the perceptions that pribumi elites hold regarding ethnic Chinese shows that negative views towards Chinese Indonesians have declined in the last two decades. He also observes that the involvement of Chinese Indonesians in

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2 Santosa cites a children’s song which was derived from the indigenous view of Chinese incompetence to be a soldier: Es gandul ditaleni merang, Cina gundul ora wani perang (a hanging ice cube is tied with hay, a bald Chinese will never dare to fight). It was sung by indigenous children upon seeing bald Chinese men to mock them.

3 The term ‘pribumi’ is conventionally used to refer to indigenous non-Chinese Indonesians. However, its official usage has been revoked by former President Habibie. Hence, officially, the terms pribumi and non-pribumi are no longer valid in their reference to non-Chinese and Chinese Indonesians who are citizens of Indonesia.
politics has enabled the establishment of economic and political alliances among Chinese Indonesians, Indonesian bureaucrats and the People’s Republic of China. Herlijanto notes a contradiction in this: on one hand, there is a decline in negative views towards Chinese Indonesians; on the other hand, the political alliance with China has given rise to an ‘imagined conspiracy’ (6), which casts doubt among some non-Chinese on Chinese Indonesians’ loyalty and nationalism. Despite such doubts, Herlijanto maintains that many non-Chinese elites are sympathetic towards Chinese Indonesians, and are supportive of equal citizenship rights for this minority. His study reveals how perceptions of Chinese Indonesians today are significantly more mixed and complicated than before.

One recent study on Chinese Indonesian stereotypes was conducted by the Indonesia National Survey Project (INSP), sponsored by the Yusof Ishak Institute of South East Asian Studies (ISEAS) and Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) in May 2017 (Fossati, Hui, and Negara 2017). A sample of 1,620 respondents was collected from various ethno-linguistic, class and religious backgrounds in thirty-four provinces. Charlotte Setijadi (2017) highlighted from the survey that Chinese Indonesians are still viewed negatively in terms of their economic privilege, exclusiveness, influence in politics and national loyalty. The rise of Islamic conservatism is suspected to have heightened negative perceptions, which might continue to render Chinese Indonesians as vulnerable targets in any riots. Setijadi, however, expressed no expectation that people’s perspectives may improve over time. In fact, the survey shows some interesting findings. For instance, the statistics regarding exclusiveness in Figure 1 show that the majority of respondents agree that Chinese Indonesians are greedy and ambitious, only care about their own community, hold beliefs that are incompatible with Indonesian values, are loyal towards China and inappropriate for inter-marriage. However, the high percentage of ’neither [agree nor disagree]’ suggests that many respondents are more ambivalent. A qualitative follow-up research to this survey, such as the present study, could shed light on the reasons for their choice. Several findings from the informants in our study provide counterpoints to the definitive answers given in Figure 1, as our interviews allowed discussion of the situational contingencies on which their perception depends.

Methodology

In order to find out how Chinese Indonesians are perceived today, we interviewed thirty Chinese and non-Chinese Indonesians youths in Surabaya. Their ages range between twenty and thirty-nine, with diverse professional and religious backgrounds, consisting of: one Buddhist, one Hindu, thirteen Protestant Christians, four Catholics and eleven Muslims. Most of the informants were middle-class professionals, except for two university students and one full-time housewife. They all reside in Surabaya although some of them originally came from the surrounding towns in East Java. Surabaya is also an interesting site for the study of Chinese Indonesians because of the ways in which the community preserves their cultural heritage (Noordjanah 2010).

Most of the interviews were conducted between July and August 2016. Two Chinese Indonesians and two non-Chinese Indonesian research assistants were trained to

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4The interview questions comprised seven categories: family background, education and work experience, practice/knowledge of Chinese customs, cultural identity, inter-ethnic relations and future aspirations for Indonesia.
conduct the interviews with Chinese Indonesian and non-Chinese Indonesian informants, respectively. Our assumption was that informants of the same ethnic background as the interviewer might feel more at ease and more forthcoming in the interview. The data were recorded, transcribed and analysed.

During the process of transcriptions, which took approximately four months, the political situation in Indonesia became very unstable as the nomination of Ahok as the governor of Jakarta for the second term triggered many reactions from Indonesian society. Jakarta residents as well as Indonesians at large were absorbed in following the outcome of the political events in Jakarta following Ahok’s nomination. In light of such new developments, the authors re-evaluated the relevance of the data as the situation might have influenced the perceptions of our informants towards Chinese Indonesians. In January 2017, we conducted additional follow-up interviews with some of our informants to see if their perceptions had changed as a result of the impending political events. However, we found that there was a little significant change of mind compared to the original interviews. We conjecture that this could be due to the location of Surabaya, which is far from the political centre in Jakarta where the demonstrations had taken place. Such distance means that our informants are less emotionally attached to the events that happened in Jakarta. Hence, the original data will still be the basis of discussion for this article while we will also consider the current political context in our discussion whenever appropriate.

**Figure 1.** Perceptions of Chinese Indonesians as Exclusive. Source: Indonesia National Survey Project (Fossati, Hui, and Negara 2017, 26).
Findings and discussion

This article will present in-depth discussion of three main stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians that are revealed in the interviews with our young informants: first, the idea that Chinese Indonesians are exclusive; second, Chinese Indonesians’ sense of nationalism (or lack thereof) in being Indonesian citizens; and third, the involvement of Chinese Indonesians in Indonesian politics.

Chinese Indonesians being ‘exclusive’

As discussed above, Chinese Indonesians have often been portrayed as forming an exclusive ethnic group which is reluctant to mingle with indigenous Indonesians. Our informants revealed three places where they would usually meet and get acquainted with other ethnic groups: in the neighbourhood, at school and in the workplace. Since our informants came from the middle class, most of them lived in gated neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, schools and workplaces offered greater chances of inter-ethnic encounters, subject to the particular school or positions in the workplace.

Places where the Chinese have lived while settling in Java have been studied by several scholars. Scholars on Indonesian architecture such as Pratiwo (2010) and Handinoto (2015) have provided thorough accounts of the Chinese settlements in Semarang and Surabaya and their surroundings, from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. When the Chinese arrived in Java, they first settled together close by the sea or a river. During the colonial period in Java, the Dutch found the Chinese and the indigenous peoples’ close relationship to be a threat to the colonial government. The Dutch therefore applied the wijkenstelsel policy in 1835, which localized the Chinese settlements and controlled their interactions with the indigenous people using a pass system. When Chinese settlements became overcrowded and as diseases became rampant, the Dutch revoked the pass system in 1917. Once the wijkenstelsel policy was revoked, the colonial government began to separate the community based on social status rather than ethnicity. This new policy resulted in the Dutch settling in an elite area together with some wealthy Chinese, middle-class Chinese in a less elitist residential area, while the poor Chinese settled with the lower economic class indigenous population (Pratiwo 2010). Apparently, such divisions have remained until the current day. The informants we selected were mostly from the middle-class society, where Chinese Indonesians and non-Chinese Indonesians share the same area of residency. A few of the non-Chinese informants we interviewed came from a middle to low economic class status.

Our middle-class informants’ neighbourhoods are usually heterogeneous in their ethnicity. In such areas, the upper middle class usually have houses with small front yards and low gates and fences. Neighbours may recognize each other but do not have much time to chat with each other. The lower middle-class residential areas usually comprise smaller houses where the front of the houses directly connect to the street with no pavement.

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5Dutch colonial authorities used the ‘divide et empera’ (‘divide and conquer’) policy in the East Indies. Fearing the Chinese might become close to the indigenous people, the Dutch used the policy of separation by giving the Chinese a higher status than the pribumi, which inevitably caused social jealousies. The resulting interracial distrust and prejudice have persisted until now.
for pedestrians. In this space, we find children playing and adults chatting with neighbours outside their homes (Pratiwo 2010, 68). Hence, the frequency of inter-ethnic social encounters depends largely on social class and residential areas.

One non-Chinese informant, Bagio⁶, who lives in an upper middle-class neighbourhood that has a handful of Chinese Indonesian families, maintained that he had never become acquainted with his Chinese neighbours because they rarely ‘hung out’ outside their house. According to him, the Chinese families stayed at home most of the time and only went out for practical purposes, such as when they go to work. Bagio could be right if he was referring to urban society, where most people do not have time to hang around outside their home in the way that people in rural areas more commonly do. Also, in a big city like Surabaya, as Pratiwo (2010) described, many wealthy Chinese Indonesians live in elite areas with high fences that separate them from their neighbours. These houses usually have a large front yard, a small guard post and many domestic helpers. Meanwhile, the owners enter and leave in a car, the windows of which are usually darkly tinted. Hence, it is unsurprising that they do not know who their neighbours are.

A common time for neighbours to meet is when there is a PKK (Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga or Family Welfare Education) meeting, which is usually conducted once a month and involves one female representative of each household in the neighbourhood or RT (Rukun Tetangga).⁷ Since such meetings are organized by the local authority, all women from the neighbourhood are mandated to attend and attendance is recorded in the meeting. Although it is unclear whether there are sanctions for any absentees, the attendance list is archived in the neighbourhood office, and those who attend the meeting would usually enquire on the whereabouts of the absentees. Such attention is often regarded as a positive neighbourly act of caring rather than as an act of subtle surveillance, whatever the real intention.

PKK meetings are one of the rare sites for Chinese Indonesian women to meet others and exchange news. There is usually informal conversation and a sense of compulsory friendliness, mingled with light jokes, and food is served by the family whose house was chosen for the meeting. The conversation is usually concerned with neighbourhood sanitation problems, security problems, health and children’s education. Current news about politics seems to be intentionally avoided as it might be considered sensitive and therefore inappropriate for a women’s gathering. Furthermore, trust is an issue. People do not easily discuss politics without knowing to which political camp or party each person belongs. With the recent 2019 presidential and legislature elections, identity politics have become more acute, and both male and female neighbours tend to avoid discussion for fear of conflict. Another out-of-bounds topic that is commonly avoided is religion, which has been the source of many conflicts (Purdey 2006; Sidel 2006). Despite the Indonesian government’s promotion of religious tolerance, conflicts still occur sporadically. Chinese Indonesians who are Christians experienced such conflicts in Situbondo and Tasikmalaya in 1996 (Purdey 2006).

⁶In order to keep the confidentiality of the informants, we use nicknames or abbreviated names.
⁷*Rukun Tetangga* (RT) literally means neighbourhood harmony. RT is formed by the government, and ID cards identify in which neighbourhood a person lives. One RT may consist of around twenty to thirty houses. An RT coordinator arranges meetings, makes announcements and takes care of other paperwork. The job of an RT coordinator is more or less like a mediator, liaising between local authorities and residents.
Our interviews also included questions on inter-ethnic friendship formed in schools or university campuses. Many of our informants mentioned the common phenomenon of sending Chinese Indonesians children to private schools and universities (Dawis 2008; Hoon 2011). This fact is acknowledged by both Chinese and non-Chinese informants. For instance, our non-Chinese informants in Surabaya stated that most Chinese attend private Christian and Catholic schools, such as Petra or Santa Maria. One non-Chinese informant, Arie, revealed that in the state school he attended, only 1% of the student population were Chinese Indonesian, confirming that they are usually a minority in state or public schools.

There was no formal education for the Chinese in the Dutch East Indies before the twentieth century. With the growth of pan-Chinese nationalism in the late nineteenth century, the Chinese community felt the need to establish formal schools for Chinese children born in the Indies to learn their heritage language and culture. As the Dutch considered the Chinese as ‘foreign Orientals’, they refused to provide schools for them. Through the establishment of the Chinese organization Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan (THHK), the Chinese community eventually established Chinese schools in Java, which soon spread around the Dutch colony. Viewing the aggressive expansion of these schools alongside pan-Chinese nationalism as a threat, the Dutch finally agreed to open the Dutch Chinese Schools (Hollandsch Chineesche School; HCS) in 1908. The HCS attracted mostly elite Chinese who considered a Western education superior to Chinese education (Govaars 2005; Handinoto 2015). The Chinese were therefore split into those who were Dutch oriented, and those who stayed loyal to their Chinese education; meanwhile, some lower-class Chinese enrolled their children in local Malay schools attended mainly by non-Chinese students. The legacy of class differences and hierarchy in education has persisted to the current day. The continuing perception that Western education is the most superior, followed by Chinese and then indigenous (state) schools, is confirmed in our interviews.

Several interesting answers were elicited from our informants about the encounters of the Chinese Indonesian and non-Chinese students at schools. Clara, a female Chinese Indonesian informant who went to a private school, commented ‘When I was little, I played with everyone. As long as we played, I never minded [their ethnicity]’. However, when the interviewer asked her what her preference is for friends, Clara confessed that she prefers making friends with other Chinese Indonesians. This is despite the fact that when asked whether she would rather be referred to as Chinese or Indonesian, she preferred to be referred to as Indonesian: ‘I identify as an Indonesian. I was born here. How can I admit that I’m Chinese?’ It can be argued that young Chinese Indonesians tend to identify themselves as Indonesian rather than Chinese. They normally give the

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8 Petra, Santa Maria and St. Louis high schools are prominent Christian protestant and Catholic schools in Surabaya. The majority of students are of Chinese descent. There are a few non-Chinese Christian students and a handful of Muslim students.

9 The THHK was founded in 1900 by the Chinese community with the help of China. It was originally intended to teach Chinese children born in the Indies to read and write Chinese and learn the teachings of Confucius. It was also founded in response to the Dutch indifference to the demand of the Chinese community to provide education for the Chinese. THHK schools were closed after 1965.

10 Besides HCS, there were schools for the Dutch called ELS (Europeesche Lagere School) and HIS (Hollandsch Inlandsche School) for the indigenous population.

11 The Chinese schools followed the curriculum used in China and were influenced by political events there.
same reason as Clara, i.e. being born in Indonesia, and add the fact that they do not speak Chinese and have no Chinese names. This difficulty in choosing whether to identify as Chinese or Indonesian was observed by Ananta et al. (2015, 239), who suggest that there was a tendency for some younger Chinese Indonesians to reject identification as Chinese as they no longer thought of themselves as Chinese.

Indy, another female Chinese Indonesian informant, recalled that when she was in elementary school, she did not know that she was of Chinese descent until someone at school asked her if she was Chinese. ‘My parents never told me that we are of Chinese descent’, she said. ‘I thought we are all Indonesians. That was what my Mom always told me’, she added. Similar sentiments are expressed by two other Chinese Indonesian informants: ‘Chinese nowadays are already assimilated’, said Teddy; meanwhile Stev, who maintained that even though he is ethnically Chinese, he is culturally more Indonesian, said, ‘We have to be able to blend in with them for we live in Indonesia’. Indeed, the ethnic Chinese have a long history of acculturation into indigenous language and culture (Pratiwo 2010, 79). We argue that while Chinese exclusiveness exists, it could be a factor of social class rather than purely ethnicity.

In a study on young people’s attitudes towards inter-ethnic and inter-religious socializing, courtship and marriage, which surveyed more than 3,000 high school students across Indonesia, Lyn Parker, Chang-Yau Hoon and Raihani (2015) concluded that a majority of young people in Indonesia are positive about inter-religious and inter-ethnic courtship. Contrary to this national trend, however, our data show that inter-ethnic romance between Chinese Indonesians and non-Chinese Indonesians remains undesirable among most young Chinese Indonesian informants. Our Chinese Indonesian informants revealed that while their parents allow them to make friends with non-Chinese, they are forbidden to date them. Oli, a Chinese Indonesian informant, swore to never marry a non-Chinese: ‘It’s shameful!’ she exclaimed. She added that some Javanese consider marrying Chinese as superior, recounting that her Javanese acquaintance felt so proud when introducing his Chinese wife. Our non-Chinese informant, Arie, shared that he knew that ethnic Chinese (especially the totok Chinese) would not allow their children to marry a non-Chinese Indonesian, as he had heard his Chinese friends saying, ‘Better marry a bule [Caucasian] who might not be rich than marry a pribumi’. Again, the colonial racial hierarchy with Westerners on the top, then foreign Orientals (or Chinese) in the middle and the pribumi at the bottom is reproduced in daily inter-ethnic discourses. However, a young Chinese Indonesian informant, Ted, differed in his sentiment towards inter-ethnic romance. He argued, ‘When I see a Chinese and an indigenous couple, I take it as simply as this: I don’t care whether you are Chinese or Indonesian. What is important is whether you are good to me and I to you, that’s enough’. He admitted that his parents wanted him to date a girl from the same ethnicity but that for him, ethnicity does not matter.

We found that stereotypes, albeit the positive ones, are often constructed based on a dialogical opposition to one’s ethnic ‘self’. Our non-Chinese informants have described the stereotypical traits of their Chinese Indonesian friends in stark contrast to that of the non-Chinese. For example, they claimed that their Chinese Indonesian friends are usually smart, hardworking, diligent, have high levels of perseverance and discipline, and are successful. These attributes are often built on a self-depreciating ethnic character of the non-Chinese Indonesian which is defined as the opposite to the Chinese. A case in
point is Auren, a non-Chinese Indonesian dentist, who admitted that her Chinese friends work faster than non-Chinese, who, according to her, are slow. By that she explained that the Chinese are more competitive than the non-Chinese. Another example is Ine who commended the modesty of her Chinese neighbours who sacrificed material enjoyment in order to send their children to school and overseas for an education. ‘They aren’t like us’, she said, adding, ‘when we get our salary, even when it isn’t that much, we tend to show off and spend our money to go shopping and buy things we like’. A sense of ambivalence – feeling of both jealousy and admiration – is detected in their expression as they wonder why the non-Chinese cannot do the same.

On the other hand, the sense of cultural superiority inherited by the Chinese Indonesians since Dutch colonial era has not disappeared entirely. The earlier remark by Oli, the Chinese Indonesian informant who disparaged inter-ethnic dating, reveals a sense of racial and class superiority among some Chinese Indonesians. Oli also thinks that many non-Chinese wish that they could be like the Chinese in their skin tone, thriftiness and work ethic, for example. A similar kind of racial superiority is also expressed among the non-Chinese Indonesians, especially in terms of indigenous nationalism (as well be discussed in a later section). In complaining that Chinese are frequently exploited as cash cows by the Indonesian bureaucracy (Coppel 1983), some of our Chinese informants showed that ‘race’ (appearance, skin colour and other physical attributes) is still an issue in their everyday social reality.

While racial prejudice towards the ethnic Chinese persists even after two decades of post-1998 reform, some non-Chinese informants shared how these prejudices can be changed when one consciously avoids racializing an issue. For example, Iza, a Javanese Muslim informant, admitted that she held biased assumptions about Chinese Indonesians before she entered Petra Christian University. She was quite apprehensive at first about studying in a university where the majority student population was Chinese. She had held the stereotype that Chinese Indonesians were exclusive, and that they would only work together with other Chinese Indonesians: ‘At first I thought they would only work together with members of the same ethnic group. Apparently I was wrong. In fact, they look at one’s competency before deciding who they want to work together with. My former prejudice eventually changed’. Another young Javanese informant also gave a similar response, ‘It isn’t a matter of ethnicity when making friends, but a matter of an individual’s character’. Both of them opted to focus on the capability and character of individuals rather than to racialize an issue to an entire ethnic group. This strategy shows the growing maturity of inter-ethnic relations and may be a key to prevent ethnic tension. As can be seen from the above responses, there is no objective ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer such as those demanded by a survey.

One Chinese Indonesian informant, Ora, shared her experience about her non-Chinese Muslim friend in her class. As he is the only Muslim in the Christian school, Ora said that they often forgot about his fasting and ate their snacks in front of him during the fasting month. Ora confessed that they felt sorry and apologized to their Muslim friend for their misbehaviour. However, to their surprise, he just laughed and said ‘No problem, please, have your snacks. Indeed I’m fasting, but you may have your meal normally. You don’t need to feel bad’. According to Ora, her Muslim friend had been very tolerant, which made her admire him. He had revealed an understanding that one should not demand others to change their habits for the sake of one’s own comfort, which stands in stark contrast to the increasingly intolerant version of Islam imposed in Indonesia’s public sphere.
Our interviews reveal that the workplace is an interesting space for inter-ethnic encounters. The Chinese Indonesian community has been stereotyped as having a preference for commerce and that their children (usually sons) are expected to take over the family business. We found both positive and negative stereotypes about the Chinese Indonesians elicited from our non-Chinese informants who work in companies owned by ethnic Chinese. One common observation was that most of the senior staff in these companies are Chinese Indonesians. Some informants attributed this to differential treatment or discrimination due to Chinese distrust of non-Chinese workers, but others reasoned it was meritocracy: because of the ‘superior’ work ethics of the Chinese Indonesians, they received the promotion that they deserved. We found that there is a general sense of inferiority amongst our non-Chinese informants when they juxtaposed the Chinese work ethic to that of their own ethnicity. Hariyono (1993), who compares Chinese and Javanese cultures, maintains that Chinese cultural values in terms of their work ethic differ from those of the Javanese. Under the influence of Confucian values, Chinese children are taught to respect their elders, work hard and honour their family name. A work ethic is inculcated to them so that even after their parents have passed away, they continue to work hard as a tribute to their deceased ancestors. In Javanese culture, the Javanese believe that it is important for them to maintain the social order through a hierarchical fashion, in which each Javanese person should know their place and behave accordingly (Mulder 1992, 44–45). Niels Mulder (1996) also notes that in order for the Javanese to advance in life, they need patrons. Patronage itself is hierarchical, in that the patron cares and the client obeys and follows all orders from their patron (70–71). Such cultural differences may explain, to some extent, the observations made by our informants about work ethics and feelings of inferiority/superiority.

Franz Magnis-Suseno (1997) notes that a Javanese adult ‘should always take into account everyone’s reactions and act so that no clash, conflict, or confrontation can ensue’ (45). We observe from the interviews that our non-Chinese informants tend to compensate any negative comments about the Chinese Indonesians with positive remarks. This might reflect the non-confrontational and polite behaviour commonly attributed to Indonesian, or more specifically, Javanese, culture, as described by Magnis-Suseno. For example, many of our non-Chinese informants described the Chinese as thrifty or stingy. However, they usually prefaced such stereotype with the fact that the Chinese Indonesians are hard workers, thus justifying their thriftiness. Although the old stereotypes still remain, our informants tended to justify them especially when describing their Chinese friends. Iza, for instance, recounted the following:

When I first entered Petra [Christian University], I felt … my heart was beating. ‘Wow, I will be a minority here’ since there were many Chinese right? I felt so insecure. I wondered if I could survive in such condition, where I am just a minority, a Javanese. But when I was there, I felt I was very welcome. In fact, to my surprise, they are good people. So I now know that my old perception about them was wrong.

In fact, one informant even defended his Chinese Indonesian friends from accusations of being stingy:

It is said that the Chinese are thrifty and calculating, but I don’t think so … not because I want to defend them, for they are also Indonesian, but of Chinese descent. Their race might be foreign, but they are Indonesian.
Such affirmation of the citizenship rights of the Chinese Indonesians was rare in the past. It is hoped that the post-1998 public sphere that is more liberal to minority participation will allow young people to interact in a more open fashion so that positive inter-ethnic relations can develop more organically.

**Sense of nationalism among Chinese Indonesians**

Throughout the history of the Chinese in Nusantara, this minority has always been tossed between being Chinese and Indonesian or in between the two identities. Donald Willmott ([1961] 2009) noted the growth of Chinese nationalism in the East Indies during the turn of nineteenth to twentieth century. Under the colonial government, such Chinese nationalism was influenced by overseas and domestic forces: the influx of reformist and nationalist influences from China, or pan-Chinese nationalism; and the discriminatory policies towards the Chinese in the Indies by the Dutch administration, which clustered the Chinese as ‘foreign Orientals’. The Dutch wanted to control the Chinese and, at the same time, to leverage them for Dutch political advantage in their relations with the indigenous peoples. In postcolonial Indonesia, the Chinese were faced with the citizenship options of being an overseas citizen of China, becoming a citizen of the newly founded nation, or remaining stateless. For those who opted to become Indonesian citizens, they and their subsequent offspring were required to obtain a certificate to prove their citizenship called SBKRI (*Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia*). The SBKRI was officially declared unnecessary by the Presidential Decision 5/56 in 1996. However, in practice, the authorities still demand Chinese Indonesians to produce the SBKRI when applying for passports and other official papers as an avenue for extortion. Such practices were finally ended during President Megawati’s administration.

After thirty-two years of the assimilation policy under the Suharto regime, many younger generation Chinese Indonesians who were born in or after the late 1990s (like our informants) show very little trace of their Chinese ancestral cultures. They no longer use Chinese names, do not speak Chinese and have little attachment towards Chinese language and cultures (Kuntjara 2017; Lie, Wijaya, and Kuntjara 2017). Consider the following interview excerpts from these young Chinese Indonesians:

**Lia:** Mandarin is only spoken by my father and mother. None of my friends speak it. So the language is all gone, forgotten. I am not against, nor supportive of it. Just let it go. I follow the modern life. All my older sisters are modern.

**Iska:** I have a Chinese name, but have never used it. I have been using my Indonesian name since I was born. My Chinese name is just for decoration.

**Dion:** I’m not enthusiastic in learning Mandarin. Never ever. That’s why I can’t speak Mandarin … and am not at all interested. Well, it may be useful in the work place, but not for now.

**Clara:** If someone would give me a free trip to China, it’s ok to visit. If not, I have no intention to go there. Not interested in visiting China.

Notwithstanding the fact that China is rapidly emerging on the world stage, these informants insisted that they are Indonesians and they have no interest in Chinese language and culture, nor any affinity to their ancestral land. However, regardless of their self-identification as Indonesian, whether they are considered as fully Indonesian by their non-Chinese counterparts is entirely a different matter. For example, Vin, a non-
Chinese informant, is of the opinion that ‘wherever they go, the Chinese are still Chinese’. Her statement echoes Ang’s (2001) sentiment that it is impossible for the Chinese diaspora to escape from Chineseness – the notion of ‘Once a Chinese, always a Chinese’ lingers. Vin further argues, ‘they [the Chinese Indonesians] must think that since they are Chinese they need to develop their own country’s [China] prosperity. That’s probably what they are doing now, but they should not do so when they are in Indonesia’. She questioned the patriotism of Chinese Indonesians because, she argued, very few of them joined the armed forces to defend Indonesia. ‘Perhaps because they had no access before, but now the access is already opened’, she noted. Echoing a nationalist tone commonly heard in contemporary Indonesian political rhetoric, Vin also found it inappropriate for Chinese Indonesians to send their children to study abroad and to speak in Chinese or English while they are in Indonesia. Vin’s interview shows that the definition of an ‘authentic’ Indonesian identity based on indigeneity is still alive and well, even though post-Suharto democratization has ushered in the notion of multiculturalism and ended the assimilation policy (Hoon 2006).

The annual celebration of Indonesia’s Independence Day on 17 August is unquestionably a time when nationalist sentiments are aggrandized. Neighbourhood residents are usually invited to clean their front yard, paint their walls and mend any damaged walls or flooring. This preparation is usually carried out together with others around the neighbourhood on a certain weekend, as an opportunity for socializing or gotong royong (mutual help). Our Chinese Indonesian informants admitted that most Chinese residents are reluctant to participate in such activity. To avoid participation, the head of household would usually cite a competing priority as an excuse. Many would send one of their male domestic helpers to join the (usually non-Chinese) crowd to work. One of our Chinese Indonesian informants expressed regret over this practice and argued that this was in fact the best time to communicate with others and to show their togetherness and unity as Indonesians.

**Chinese Indonesians’ involvement in politics**

In contrast to the stereotypes, Chinese Indonesians have indeed contributed to national politics in Indonesia, albeit with little official acknowledgement. In fact, according to Leo Suryadinata (2005), there is historical evidence that the Chinese were involved in the Indonesian struggle for independence. However, the avenues to political participation for ethnic Chinese were closed after the abortive coup of 1965, due to China’s alleged involvement in the coup. The only Chinese Indonesian appointed in Suharto’s cabinet at the tail end of his regime was Bob Hasan, the Minister of Trade and Industry. However, the situation changed after the 1998 riots as Chinese Indonesians began to actively exercise their citizenship rights and participate in politics.

As noted by Wibowo (2001), after the riots some Chinese left Indonesia to escape anti-Chinese violence, but those who stayed were forced to reflect on their position. Chinese Indonesians knew that silence was no longer an option, and in order to continue to live in Indonesia, they need a political voice. Two large Chinese Indonesian social organizations were set up in the aftermath of the 1998 riots: PSMTI (Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia) and INTI (Perhimpunan Indonesia Tionghoa). Apart from carrying out the conventional functions of traditional Chinese clan associations, such as social
networking and hosting cultural events, these two mass organizations also actively spread political awareness, voiced Chinese aspirations and campaigned against discrimination. In addition, a dozen other more politically oriented organizations have been established by Chinese Indonesians since 1998 (Hoon 2008; Tanasaldy 2013; Wibowo 2001).

In the past few years, the controversial Chinese political figure who was the governor of Jakarta from 2014 to 2017, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), gained the media spotlight. Ahok is an antithesis to stereotypes of the Chinese as economic animals that are apolitical, disloyal and corrupt. He provides a counter example to non-Chinese perceptions, epitomizing a new generation of Chinese Indonesians who identify totally with, and are undisputedly committed to, Indonesia. Insisting that ‘Indonesian-ness’ should not be based on ethnicity, Ahok proved that non-*pribumi* can also become ‘real’ Indonesians (Hatherell and Welsh 2017). Although facing insurmountable challenges as a ‘double minority’ (Chinese and Christian), Ahok has been exemplary in changing the image of Chinese Indonesians.

Our non-Chinese informant, Bagio, who was very impressed with Ahok’s work in Jakarta, shared his opinion:

There’s one UIN (State Islamic University) student who told me that his university refused to invite Ahok due to his ethnicity. This made me think whether this person is an educated person … how could they reject Ahok because of his race. I think this is unfair. The fact is Ahok has made Jakarta a better place. I don’t live in Jakarta, but all my friends in Jakarta like Ahok. There were others who said that Ahok was too harsh, but that’s what made Jakarta better.

Such expressions of support from an indigenous Indonesian towards a Chinese Indonesian were scarce in the past. In fact, Ahok’s political participation, controversial as it may be, seems to have changed the attitude of some non-Chinese towards Chinese Indonesians.

However, our informants hardly discussed Chinese participation in politics apart from talking about Ahok, who had been controversial, vocal and the focus of media attention. None of them mentioned Chinese Indonesian politicians such as Mari Pangestu, Kwik Kian Gie, Sofyan Tan, Alvin Lie, Hary Tanoesoedibjo and other prominent figures. Besides the legacy of Chinese being apolitical, this could also be a sign of age, wherein the younger generation are mostly apathetic about politics in general, notwithstanding the increase of political participation among ethnic Chinese. Some regional mayors and governors are also of Chinese descent, such as the deputy governor in West Kalimantan, the mayor of Singkawang, the former governor of Jakarta and some members of regional parliaments. Sofyan Wanandi argues that the door for the Chinese to participate in Indonesian political contestation has been widely opened, but the opportunity had not been fully used by the Chinese Indonesians. Perhaps, past wounds have not been fully healed.12 The dramatic controversy surrounding Ahok shows that anti-Chinese sentiment can still be easily provoked by certain parties who wish to manipulate racial differences for political gains.

In 2014, a new political party, PSI (*Partai Solidaritas Indonesia*), was set up by Grace Natalie, a young Chinese Indonesian who was formerly a TV newsreader and journalist.

The party was dubbed as a ‘millennial’s party’ because the founder had been born in 1982. Taking an overt stance against injustice, intolerance and all forms of discrimination, Natalie was regarded as the female version of Ahok. She strove to provide an inclusive political model that transcends ethnic, religious and educational backgrounds. It was hoped that such educated and open-minded young people could contribute better solutions in managing the cultural and religious diversity of Indonesia. However, like Ahok, her precarious identity as a Chinese-Christian double minority has become the target of resentment from the religious extremists that had fought against Ahok’s political candidacy. Nonetheless, the emergence of Grace Natalie in the political realm after Ahok has encouraged the formerly silent Chinese Indonesian minority towards greater involvement in national politics.

**Conclusion**

This article has discussed continuity and change in various stereotypes of the ethnic Chinese in contemporary Indonesian society. The informants in the present study belong to a post-1998 generation who did not directly experience the Suharto regime. Our findings show that even though some old stereotypes still persist, there is less racialization in the perceptions of the Other among both our non-Chinese and Chinese informants, compared to earlier studies. More specifically, deep-seated stereotypes of Chinese being exclusive, disloyal and apolitical are still present, but a nuanced analysis shows that the articulations of these stereotypes are less simplistic and are often followed by counter-examples from social reality. It is observed that young educated Indonesians are increasingly cognizant of that stereotyping could potentially lead to racialization. Anita Wahid, the daughter of the late President Abdurrahman Wahid, wrote in the preface of the book *Ada Aku di Antara Tionghoa dan Indonesia* (2018) that while it might be true that some Chinese are stingy, there are also stingy people from other ethnic groups; similarly, while it might be true that some Chinese are greedy, oppressive or exclusive, there are also people from other ethnic groups who have these characteristics. This shows that the ‘signifying practice’ of stereotyping ‘reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes differences’ in a grossly generalized manner (Hall 1997, 257).

Our study notes that representations of Chineseness are no longer taboo in the post-1998 Indonesian public sphere. As there has been a high profile coverage of ethnic Chinese participation in politics, the public are now more informed about the Chinese community and are less likely to form opinions based on irrational emotions, racial prejudice and skewed media representations. Considering the dynamic changes in Indonesian politics today, the effort to undo stereotypes of the Chinese Indonesians is unending, due to the complexity of the problems. Yet, the progress made in the past two decades offers a glimpse of hope that there is now more space for inter-ethnic understanding to be cultivated than during the Suharto era. Furthermore, personal encounters are powerful ways to increase inter-ethnic cooperation and acceptance of differences. They can prove that fears and prejudices are exaggerated anxiety. As the Javanese saying goes, ‘witeng tresna jalaran saka kulina’ (love grows as we get along with each other); we are hopeful that such development may eventually lead to mutual acceptance.
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