

Continuity and Change: The Dynamics of Chineseness in Indonesia

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Abstract

The momentous rise of China as a new global super power has given rise to renewed interest in Chineseness among diasporic Chinese communities. The impact of China's rise has a tremendous influence on the ways in which Chinese culture is being strategically reconstructed in contemporary Indonesia. To many Chinese overseas, Chineseness has become an indispensable social asset capital, cultural resource and ethno-commodity that can benefit them in their commercial dealings with China. The economic incentive that China has to offer has become a major impetus for Chinese Indonesians to resinicize by reconnecting to their Chineseness, learning Mandarin and enthusiastically consuming Chinese cultural products. Through examining the historical trajectory and contemporary dynamics of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, this article argues that for the time being, Chineseness is embraced positively among Chinese Indonesians as an economic asset. However, the fate of this community, which has experienced numerous violent traumas in the past, remains uncertain in the future.

Keywords: Chinese Indonesians, rise of China, Chinese overseas, resinicization, Chinese diaspora

Introduction

Since the first decade of the twentieth century, the world has witnessed a transformation in global and regional structures of power as China's economy has rapidly risen. With its continuing high GDP growth, China is predicted to overtake the US as the largest economy in the world before 2030 (Colvin, 2017). The Chinese overseas played an instrumental role in the early stages of China's journey of economic growth. They brought in as much as two thirds of foreign direct investment (FDI) flows when China implemented the Reform and Opening-Up Policy in the late 1970s and gave China a resource unavailable to any other rising power (Lee, 2016).

Occupying a dominant role in the private sector of most Southeast Asian countries, the ethnic Chinese are important investors in China. Their cultural identity or Chineseness, understanding of cultural norms, and personal networks have helped them to mitigate some of the inherent risks faced by non-Chinese foreign investors. They have also played a reverse role in facilitating China's outward investment into their host countries (Huang, 2014). The new maritime silk route and the Belt and Road Initiative provide an opportunity for Beijing to strategically build on the role played by the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia.

Jacques (2008) conjectures that as China continues to rise, and as global interests in rising China grow exponentially, "the Chinese diaspora is likely to expand greatly; enjoy growing prestige as a result of China's rising status; and feel an even closer affinity with China". On the other hand, Wang (2015) argues that China endeavors to create an environment where it is not feared as a great power but respected for its wealth and creativity, which are necessary conditions for a modern civilization – one that its diaspora can share its pride. With a proliferating international trade, especially after the start of the ASEAN–China Free Trade

Agreement (ACFTA) in 2010, China became ASEAN's largest trading partner. Therefore, Wang (2015) further asserts that for ASEAN there is no alternative apart from seeking a sustainable balance in its relationship with the newly emerged superpower.

Recognizing the importance of its diaspora, China has intensified its engagement with this community in recent decades through soft power and public diplomacy (Ding, 2014). In fact, way back in 1995 when Xi Jinping was the Party Secretary of Fuzhou, he had already advocated for "big overseas Chinese work" (*da qiaowu*). After ascending to the presidency, the Overseas Chinese Affairs (*qiaowu*) remains an integral part of Xi's "Chinese Dream" discourse of economic modernization, scientific and technological innovation, and cultural revival (Liu & Van Dongen, 2016, p. 805). To this end, the Chinese government has a tendency to coalesce the categories of *huaren* (ethnic Chinese of foreign citizenship) and *huaqiao* (Chinese nationals who reside overseas) into a homogenous *qiaobao* (Chinese compatriots overseas) category. Suryadinata (2017, p. 6) argues that the nationality of Chinese overseas is strategically blurred when the Chinese leaders feel it is in the interest of China.

To exert strategic influence on the Chinese diaspora, China has engaged in various soft power initiatives including the setting up of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms around the world. Through these institutes, China uses the overseas Chinese to help promote the Chinese language and culture to the non-Chinese, as well as to Chinese descents who have lost the language and cultural familiarity. Such a move allows China to resinize the Chinese overseas and strengthen their cultural affinity with China so that they can serve, or at least be sympathetic to, China's broader interests (Suryadinata, 2017, p. 182).

The impact of China's rise has a tremendous influence on the ways in which Chinese culture is being strategically reconstructed in contemporary Indonesia. This article will examine the continuity and change in the dynamics between China and the Chinese diaspora in Indonesia. It will begin with a discussion of the historical trajectory of this internally diverse diasporic community, including the discriminatory Assimilation Policy implemented during President Suharto's era that forced the Chinese to erase their cultural identity. The large scale anti-Chinese violence followed by the fall of Suharto in May 1998 heralded a new era of reform and democratization when the resurgence of Chineseness was celebrated. This article critically evaluates the cultural politics of the Chinese diaspora in contemporary Indonesia and the implications of the rise of China on their identity quest.

Foreigners who are not foreign

Representing 1.2% of Indonesia's population of approximately 270 million, the Chinese minority has been described by Wang (1976) as "unique" because their problematic identity throughout Indonesia's history. This minority has suffered a long history of persecution since the first ethnic cleansing carried out by the Dutch in Java in 1740. They have been rendered convenient targets of social hostility at different historical periods, culminating in the violence of May 1998 (Hoon, 2008). Despite the fact that the Chinese have lived in the archipelago for many generations, especially some of the *peranakan* who have lineages extending back to the 1600s (Pan, 1990), many indigenous Indonesians continue to treat them as outsiders or foreigners.

In fact, historians have argued that Chinese immigrants who settled in the archipelago before the establishment of Dutch colonial rule have had mostly been absorbed into the local society (Somers, 1964; Reid, 1996). It can be argued that the colonial divide and rule policy had artificially created a Chinese minority in the Dutch East Indies. The Dutch policies implanted the historical seeds of prejudice that occasionally flourished into tension between the ethnic Chinese and the *pribumi* (lit. 'persons of the soil', 'native' or 'indigenous' Indonesians), at the same time producing Chineseness. This constructed Chineseness later became a valuable political tool that was manipulated by postcolonial Indonesian regimes to their own ends.

The ethnic Chinese were targeted as scapegoats, particularly during times of national crisis. For instance, the birth and death of President Suharto's regime were marked by anti-Chinese violence. The difficult position of the ethnic Chinese as pariah is encapsulated in the words of the late writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, written in 1960: "They have been here since the time of our ancestors. In fact, they are real Indonesians who live and die in Indonesia. However, due to political sleight of hand, they have suddenly become foreigners who are not foreign" (Toer, 1998, p. 54, my translation). These words were published in response to Presidential Instruction 10/1959 (known as the PP-10) – a discriminatory policy implemented by President Sukarno to prohibit the Chinese from trading in rural areas. This policy caused more than 100,000 ethnic Chinese to leave Indonesia for China (Mandal, 1998).

A culturally heterogeneous community

The Chinese minority in Indonesia has never been culturally homogeneous. Historically, they were divided into the newcomer *totok* Chinese who were pure-blood and China-oriented, and the acculturated *peranakan* Chinese who have intermarried with the local population and settled in the Malay Archipelago for centuries. The identification of the *totok/peranakan* distinction had originally been based on birthplace and race (Williams, 1960; Somers, 1964). Centuries of residence in Indonesia caused *peranakan* men to lose many of the features of their Chineseness as they adopted local culture, language, customs and practices, and intermarried with local women because most of the Chinese immigrants were male. Some of them had even converted to Islam, adopted Muslim-sounding names and dress, and were recognized by the Dutch authorities as natives (Salmon, 1996, pp. 193–195). Although thoroughly hybridized in many aspects of their culture, the *peranakan* had never totally disappeared as an ethnic group. Williams argue that by 1900, a large proportion of *peranakan* had still "never been fully assimilated into the native population" (1960, p. 13). Salmon (1996) divided the *peranakan* into two segments: the visible and the invisible ones. The latter were those who had merged into local societies such as the Muslim converts, while the former were those who persistently held on to what was left of their Chineseness – cultural traits that allowed them to retain their identity as Chinese, distinguishable from the native population.

Colonial racial hierarchy, economic privileges, religion, and cultural identity were the main obstacles to assimilation. In the colonial society of the Dutch East Indies, the population was divided into three racial groups with different legal rights and privileges: the Europeans were at the top, the Foreign Orientals (mainly Chinese) were in the middle and the natives were at the bottom. Wedged between the Europeans and the native, the Chinese were the tax collectors and loan providers and were granted monopoly privileges to engage in profitable commercial activities such as the selling of opium and the operation of gambling establishments and pawnshops. The granting of exclusive licenses to the Chinese proved to be a simple and inexpensive means for the colonial government of raising official revenues from license fees (Williams, 1960, p. 25). The *pribumi* resented the Chinese for their economic roles in the nineteenth century as they perceived the Chinese as blood-suckers of the Javanese (Anonymous, 1992). Under the colonial racial regime, there was little incentive for the Chinese to assimilate into indigenous society because it would have meant a drop in social status and the loss of some of these privileges.

Scholars also attributed the *peranakan* resistance to assimilation as a sign of Chinese chauvinism and a sense of cultural superiority. For instance, Amyot argues, "*peranakan* society distinguishes itself from Indonesian society by what it has retained of Chinese culture. These retentions are due partly to the character of Chinese culture itself which is hardy and singularly persistent even under the most adverse conditions" (1972, p. 73). Williams also conjectures that Chinese belief in the supremacy of their civilization was possibly the chief barrier to social communication with Indonesians (1960, p. 15). This point is further attested by Li, who iterates

that “feelings of Sino-centrism or Han-centrism prevented the Chinese from integrating completely into the local society” (2003, p. 223).

The arrival of a new wave of Chinese immigrants to the archipelago in the last decades of the nineteenth century confronted the *peranakan* with a different way of being Chinese. In comparison with the earlier predominantly male migrants, these new immigrants included a significant number of women. As a result, it became possible for Chinese men to find a China-born bride rather than to marry an indigenous or *peranakan* woman. These immigrants subsequently formed a distinct *totok* community (Mackie & Coppel, 1976, p. 8). This community was not a unified group because they came from different parts of China and spoke in various Chinese dialects. The 1930 Census showed that the four largest groups were the Hokkiens, the Hakkas, the Cantonese, and the Teochews. However, when contrasted to their *peranakan* counterparts who differed significantly from them in cultural practices, language, and political outlook, the internal heterogeneity of the *totok* seemed unified.

The migration of Chinese from China into Indonesia halted after the Great Depression of 1929. As a result, the *totok* community was not regenerated with new immigrants (Coppel, 2002, p. 122). Such a development rendered the *totok/peranakan* distinction based on race, ancestry and birthplace unrealistic. Scholars began to adopt a socio-cultural distinction to account for these communities (Skinner, 1963; Suryadinata, 1981; Tan, 1997). According to this definition, a *totok* referred to those Chinese who were brought up in Chinese culture and used Chinese as their medium of communication even though they were born in Indonesia. In contrast, a *peranakan* referred not only to the Chinese with mixed ancestry, but also to those pure-blood local-born Chinese who could speak Mandarin or any Chinese dialect (see Coppel, 2002, Chapter 7).

The two communities generally diverged in their identity, cultural, political and educational outlooks throughout the first half of the twentieth century. For instance, the *peranakan* spoke their own Sino-Malay language, went to Dutch or Malay schools and were culturally and politically oriented to either the Netherlands or Indonesia. On the other hand, the *totok* spoke a Chinese dialect or Mandarin, went to Chinese schools and had cultural and political affinity with China or Taiwan (Suryadinata, 1981). However, there were instances where these communities altered their cultural identity as a result of particular political or social circumstances.

A case in point would be the rise of pan-Chinese nationalism in the Indies in the early 1900s, which led to the emergence of Chinese organizations such as the Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan (THHK, or the Chinese Organization), the Sianghwee (Chinese Chamber of Commerce) and a Sino-Indonesian newspaper, *Sin Po*, and fostered a renewed sense of Chineseness among the *peranakan* (Wilmott, 1956, p. 6). The recently arrived *totok* also presented a version of Chineseness which was appealing to some *peranakan* who longed for cultural belonging and who felt that their hybrid identity lacked cultural authenticity. These *peranakan* participated in the THHK that sought to reform the “corrupt” Chinese customs practiced by the *peranakan*, to promote Confucianism and to provide Chinese schools with a modern curriculum (Salmon, 1996). The resinicized *peranakan* began to reorient themselves culturally and politically towards China as Confucianism and Chinese education awakened them to a sense of pride in being Chinese (Somers, 1964).

The relevance of the *totok/peranakan* distinction gradually diminished after the implementation of the military-backed Assimilation Program during the New Order from 1966 to 1998. Under this program, Chinese schools, organizations and presses were forced to close down. All Chinese were forced to enroll in Indonesian-medium schools and speak Bahasa Indonesia, the national *lingua franca*. Suryadinata (1978b, p. 32) argues that most Chinese were Indonesianized during that period, signifying the breakdown of the dichotomy between *totok* and *peranakan*. However, after going through the forced baptism of assimilation during

the New Order, the cultural gap between the *totok* and the *peranakan* narrowed because very few practical ways were left to sustain the *totok* culture.

The tyranny of assimilation

During the New Order regime, Chineseness was subject to suppression as the state perceived it to be a security threat associated with Communism. The People's Republic of China and, by association, the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, were allegedly involved in the September 1965 abortive coup. After the coup, a surge of anti-Communist and anti-Chinese sentiment swept through the country (Suryadinata, 1978a, p. 138). The ethnic Chinese – their culture, their religion, their role in the nation's economy, and their very existence – were labelled by New Order politicians as *Masalah Cina* ('the Chinese Problem') (Allen, 2003, p. 387). To manage this problematic minority, the state implemented a military-backed assimilation policy to prohibit all expressions of Chineseness in the public sphere, including Chinese names, schools, organizations, media and cultural practices. The fact that printed matter in Chinese characters fell under the category of prohibited imports like narcotics, pornography and explosives when entering Indonesia is a testament to the gravity of the regime's treatment of Chineseness as a menace to the nation (Heryanto, 1999).

In fact, suspicions that the Chinese-Indonesians were a potential fifth column of China were strongly felt during the Cold War period. The suspicious climate resulted in distrust of ethnic Chinese by local government and *pribumi*, and justified their discrimination and cultural oppression (Sukma, 1999, pp. 143–145). Tan maintains that, "It was a difficult period for ethnic Chinese who were then still trying hard to be accepted by the indigenous people" (2001, pp. 221–223). He argues that the Chinese overseas generally identified with the great civilization of China – not with the state of China – and this did not reduce their loyalty to their respective countries. For Tan (2001), historical and cultural identification should be distinguished from political identification with China as the People's Republic of China. However, this understanding was not shared by the New Order administration, which viewed anything related to Chineseness as linked to the Communists and thus as threatening to national interests.

Even though this paranoia faded after the Cold War and Sino-Indonesian relations were normalized in the early 1990s, it never disappeared completely. Heryanto (1998, p. 105) observes that there was a softening of anti-Chinese sentiment in the 1990s after the normalization of Sino-Indonesian relations and attributed this phenomenon to "the waning effectiveness of the phantom communist threat". However, an article calling for ethnic Chinese to assimilate through compulsory military conscription written by a New Order military officer, Letjen TNI (Purn) Sayidiman Suryohadiprojo (1997), shows that the government (especially the military) was still suspicious that the Chinese overseas might be used by the PRC to build a strong China.

While the ethnic Chinese were given the privilege to expand the nation's economy (and their own wealth), they were, paradoxically, marginalized and discriminated against in all social spheres: culture, language, politics, entrance to state-owned universities, public service and public employment (Heryanto, 1999, p. 326). This continuous and intentional official discrimination against the Chinese continuously emphasized their foreignness and placed them in a vulnerable position of ethnic and class hostility. Massive anti-Chinese riots broke out in May 1998, giving vent to surfacing the anti-Chinese sentiment, which resulted from decades of discriminatory state policy.

In 1998, when Indonesia was devastated by the financial crisis that was sweeping through East and Southeast Asia, there were mounting pressures from the public calling for President Suharto to resign. The government, however, made the ethnic Chinese scapegoats and held them responsible for the economic turmoil (Budiman, 2001, pp. 279–280). The May 1998 anti-

Chinese riots saw the property of the ethnic Chinese ransacked, looted, and burnt down, physical attacks on the Chinese, and rapes of Chinese women. Many wealthy Chinese Indonesian families fled with their capital to safer areas either in Indonesia (e.g. Bali) or overseas (Purdey, 2006).

The reaction of the PRC government towards the anti-Chinese atrocities in Indonesia was noticeably restrained. Because the ethnic Chinese were officially Indonesian citizens, China refrained from interfering in Indonesia's domestic affairs (Suryadinata, 2017, p. 62). Moreover, China did not want to jeopardize the bilateral relations with Indonesia that were only restored in 1990. Suryadinata (2017, p. 65) further argues that the 1998 anti-Chinese riots happened during a time when China was beginning to rise and when it was trying to gain acceptance in ASEAN. Hence, it was not in Beijing's interest to intervene. However, he conjectures that if similar large scale anti-Chinese violence were to happen in Indonesia today, China's response might be different and intervention could be likely.

A hundred flowers bloom

The collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998 marked the end of the authoritarian New Order era, and the beginning of a new, reformed democratic era. For the Chinese minority in Indonesia, this reformation (*Reformasi*) opened up opportunities to access equal rights as citizens and to revive their previously oppressed cultural identity (Hoon, 2008). The post-Suharto era is characterized by substantial legal reforms including revocation of various discriminatory laws on citizenship and religious and cultural expressions concerning the ethnic Chinese. These include the annulment of compulsory submission of additional documents as proof of citizenship in official applications, which was only applicable to the Chinese Indonesians, the end of the official use of the terms *pribumi* (native) and *non-pribumi* (non-native), the repeal of laws prohibiting the study of the Chinese language, the proclaiming of Chinese New Year as a national holiday, and the prohibition against the use of the derogatory term *Cina* (Chinks or Chinamen) to refer to the Chinese.

From being a stigmatized identity, Chineseness became a much celebrated ethno-commodity in post-Suharto Indonesia (Sai & Hoon, 2013). This is especially evident during Chinese New Year festive season when colorful parades featuring lion and dragon dances are performed in Chinatowns and Chinese temples, and where major shopping malls are decorated with ornaments in the lucky color red. The mass media flock to feature Chinese-themed programs ranging from game shows where audiences dress in traditional Chinese costumes to talk shows featuring Chinese *feng shui* and fortune telling (Hoon, 2009). These scenes were totally unimaginable two decades ago when President Suharto was in power.

With previously denied legal rights of the Chinese gradually restored, Chinese culture and identity have been revitalized in Indonesia. The unprecedented proliferation of Indonesians who take up the Chinese language after *Reformasi* has been referred to by scholars as the "Mandarin Fever" (Hoon & Kuntjara, 2019). Furthermore, the rise of China along with the economic opportunities the PRC has to offer have led to renewed pride among the Chinese overseas in their cultural heritage and identity. Some scholars have referred to this phenomenon as a process of resinicization (e.g. see Ang, 2001; Setijadi, 2016b; Hoon, 2017). Resinicization refers to the process in which ethnic Chinese who have lost almost all of their affinity with their Chinese origin begin to re-discover their Chineseness and voluntarily identify with their cultural roots (see Ang 2001: 84; Liu 2012; Suryadinata 2017: 17). It can be argued that the post-Suharto resurgence was dominated by primordial Chineseness that is characterized by a naturalistic, fixed and essentialized notion, fundamentally based on tradition, language, generational lineage, physical attribute and culture. It can be argued that the expressions of such Chineseness have been largely promoted and financed by an older generation of *totok* business elites who were keen to revive the pre-Suharto golden age when Chinese schools,

associations and media flourished. Moreover, the primordial version of Chineseness with which the global Chinese diaspora identifies can be used as a strategic resource to tap into Chinese capitalist networks and to achieve trust for business dealings with other members of this imagined community or with China (see Menkhoff, Chay, Evers, & Hoon, 2014).

The dawn of a new era?

The watershed in Indonesia-China relations came in 2005 when the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono administration signed a broad Strategic Partnership agreement with Beijing. Incorporating political, defense, security, legal, economic and socio-cultural cooperation, the partnership was enhanced in January 2010 by the ratification of a five year plan of action committing to a “bilateral dialogue mechanism on technical cooperation, cooperation in regional and international affairs and on funding arrangements” (Nabbs-Keller, 2011, p. 32). The bilateral ties between the two countries continues to strengthen across different spheres: political (Goh, 2018), economic (Aisyah, 2018) and military (Parameswaran, 2018), even though historically the armed forces were very hostile towards China. This signifies the waning of Indonesia’s perception of China as an ideological threat (Tjhin, 2012).

Culturally, besides the resinicization of the Chinese in Indonesia, there has also been official promotion of Chinese Indonesian culture in China. For instance, in May 2011, more than 300 Chinese Indonesians participated in an Indonesian cultural event in Fujian province, the ancestral homeland of many of Indonesia’s Chinese, in an event aimed at “deepening old familial ties” (Nabbs-Keller, 2011, p. 32). Furthermore, over the years, the Chinese government has continuously increased the number of scholarships for Indonesian students who wish to pursue a higher education in China, signifying China’s commitment to the expansion of its soft power in Indonesia, as well as an increasing demand of Indonesian students for Chinese degrees (Yosephine, 2017).

The momentous rise of China as a new global super power has given rise to renewed interest in Chineseness among the diasporic Chinese communities (Kuehn, Louie and Pomfret, 2013). In contemporary Indonesia, the refashioning of Chineseness among assimilated Chinese Indonesians resembles, to some extent, the aforementioned resinicization of the *peranakan* during the pan-Chinese nationalism movement of the early twentieth century. With the new economic and political dynamics following China’s rise, Ang (2013) asks whether there will be space for a vernacular, localized, hybrid Chinese diasporic identity, or whether they will increasingly be overpowered by homogenizing, essentializing and nationalizing forces of a global China.

In identifying the Chinese Indonesians as an economic ethnicity, Tong (2010) argues that the survival of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia as a distinct group does not solely depend on traditional cultural markers but also economic ones. Indeed, the ethnic identity of the Chinese Indonesians who grew up during Suharto’s regime is more aptly defined by their class identity – i.e. the middle class status that a majority of them occupy – rather than by culture because most of them are unfamiliar with Chinese traditions and culture, and have lost the ability to speak Chinese. The Chinese ethnicity, thus, has become a form of social capital which allows this community to maintain a common identity through business networks for economic and ethnic survival (Tong, 2010, p. 238).

For Indonesia, the rise of China is not just empty rhetoric but is economically important. The two countries share strong economic ties, as China has become Indonesia’s largest trading partner in the past few years: two-way trade in 2016 exceeded US\$52 billion and hit US\$63.4 billion in 2017 (Goh, 2018). China’s deepening economic ties with Indonesia is also reflected on other ambitious projects to build roads, ports and railways in the archipelago. Furthermore, Indonesia is expected to be the largest beneficiary in Southeast Asia of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to pump around USD 87 billion into infrastructure projects (Yuniarni,

2018). The official visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to Indonesia in May 2018 further strengthened China-Indonesia bilateral relations, especially in their cooperation towards realizing the twenty-first century maritime Silk Road and the community of common destiny (Ge, 2018).

The growing Chinese investments in Southeast Asia provide China an opportunity to build on the role played by the region's Chinese diaspora. Setijadi (2016b) notes that China has been using the metaphor of a bridge (*qiao*) to describe the Chinese overseas since the 1970s, signifying the brokerage role of this community to make connections between their host society and their ancestral land. When China first opened up its economy to foreign investments, Chinese overseas were able to capitalize on their Chineseness and personal networks to mitigate some of the inherent risks faced by non-Chinese investors. Cognizant of the role of the Chinese diaspora to leverage on the economic benefits of a relationship with China, Beijing has attempted to exert strategic influence on the Chinese diaspora through soft-power incentives as mentioned above.

Chineseness has now become an indispensable social capital, cultural resource and ethno-commodity that can benefit commercial dealings with China. The economic incentive that China has to offer has become a major impetus for Chinese Indonesians, particularly the younger generation, to resinicize by reconnecting their clan connections, learning Mandarin and enthusiastically consuming Chinese cultural products (Hoon, 2008). Setijadi (2016b) observes that Chinese Indonesian entrepreneurs would strategically perform their Chineseness as a way of creating a sense of primordial affinity when dealing with their counterparts from China. However, while they may share linguistic and cultural similarities, observers argue that most ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia do not have any affinity with China beyond purely economic interests and the profitability of investments (Chang, 2013; Huang, 2014; Tong, 2010, p. 247).

The rising Chinese economic influence has generally been welcomed by its neighboring countries, especially with enormous trade opportunities brought about by the Belt and Road Initiative. However, over the past few years, there have been some domestic concerns in Indonesia on China's rising influence over its economy. Some of these concerns are xenophobic in nature, and others are more substantially based on fears of economic competition. The former are expressed in the occasional media and political bickering about on the loyalty and nationalism of Chinese Indonesian politicians or business people when they strike deals with China (see Tjhin, 2012). The latter can be exemplified in the media coverage of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area which was dominated by a fear of the influx of Chinese products. More recently, as foreign direct investments from China hit a record high, rumors surrounding the alleged influx of between 10 and 20 million people into Indonesia taking over blue collar jobs from the locals spread like wild fire. The rumor was at its peak during the time when former Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaya Purnama, popularly known as Ahok, was accused of blasphemy showing that it is not only xenophobic but also political in nature (*Reuters*, 18 April 2017). Although President Joko Widodo subsequently dismissed the rumor as baseless, concerns regarding increasing Chinese influence in Indonesia's economy continue to be a sensitive issue that may end up with Chinese Indonesians bearing the brunt. An observer predicts that the politicization of Chinese investment in Indonesia will continue to be a thorny issue in the approaching 2019 general election (Ge, 2018).

Moreover, Chinese Indonesians still face considerable challenges in daily affairs such as political participation and religious practices. The high profile blasphemy case of the former governor of Jakarta was a case in point. Famous for his boorish and unsympathetic communication style, the Chinese Christian governor, Ahok, embodies the identity of a double minority and was a controversial figure in Indonesia. He was a target of smear campaigns for his ethnic and religious identity when he ran for the 2017 gubernatorial election of Jakarta.

During an event in 2016, he told the audience not to be fooled by people who manipulate a certain verse of the Quran as a justification to not vote for a non-Muslim (i.e. him) in the upcoming elections. The statement was quoted out of context, sensationalized and went viral in the social media. Ahok was eventually charged with defamation of the Holy Quran. In two anti-Ahok mass rallies held in Jakarta in early November and early December 2016, between 100,000 and 500,000 people took to the street demanding the arrest and prosecution of Ahok. Such large-scale mass events unwittingly re-awakened fear of the ethnic Chinese on the recent anti-Chinese riots of 1998 (*BBC News*, 2017). After losing the election in April 2017, Ahok was sentenced to two years imprisonment, which further led to a disillusionment about justice in Indonesia in general and the unfair treatment of ethnic and religious minorities in particular.

In fact, racial and religious fault lines were opportunistically exploited by Ahok's rival candidate, Anies Baswedan, during the Jakarta gubernatorial elections in his repeated appeal for voters to choose a *pribumi* Muslim as their leader. In his inauguration speech on 16 October 2017 at Jakarta's Presidential Palace, Baswedan renewed the indigeneity discourse by emphasizing that native Indonesians should be the masters of their own home: "In the past, we *pribumi* were oppressed and defeated. Now we have independence, now is the time to be the host in our own home" (Simandjuntak, 2017). This statement invokes the otherness of the ethnic Chinese based on the long-held perception of them being "foreigners who are not foreign" lodging (*numpang*) in the land that belongs to the "persons of the soil" (*pribumi*) of Indonesia (Hoon, 2008).

Besides the dramatic case of Ahok, in recent years it has been reported that there has been a rise in acts of intolerance and violence carried out by radical Islamists that have resulted in attacks on Chinese temples and demands for Chinese religious statues to be removed. Most recently, in August 2017, a 100-foot statue of a Chinese warrior deity, Guan Yu, erected in a temple complex in East Java had to be covered with an enormous sheet due to pressure from a Muslim mob. Protesters gathered outside the East Java legislature building in the city of Surabaya to demand its destruction. They claimed that the statue was an emblem of idol worship; a protestor went as far as condemning it to be a symbol of treason – to have the statue of a foreign general on Indonesian soil (*The Straits Times*, 17 August 2017). The incidents above point to the contestation in the public expression of Chineseness, the ongoing precarious position of the ethnic Chinese and the fragility of multiculturalism in Indonesia.

Conclusion

Focusing on the Chinese diaspora in Indonesia, this article has presented a nuanced discussion of the identity conundrum of this ethnic group in light of their historical trajectory as a problematic minority. It examined the meaning of Chineseness to this community and how such a meaning has shifted in different historical periods, demonstrating the mutability and instrumentality of identity according to the context. The post-Suharto reformation and democratization process has opened up a new space for the Chinese Indonesians to rediscover their cultural heritage and identity, which has coincided with the rise of China in the global economic, military and political arena.

The impact of China's rise has a tremendous influence on the ways in which Chinese culture is being strategically reconstructed in contemporary Indonesia. The same may be true in the larger context of many assimilated ethnic Chinese in the region who now find the impetus to rediscover their ethnic identity and heritage in order to engage with the rising China. For the time being, Chineseness is embraced positively among Chinese Indonesians as an economic asset. However, no one can predict if there might be a potential backlash against the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia should Sino-Indonesian bilateral relations take a turn and should Indonesia's domestic economy and politics encounter challenges in the future.

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