

*Chinese Indonesians at the Crossroads: Post-Suharto Identity Dilemma in the Rise of China in the New Era*

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The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2016  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

This research explores the subjective reality of new generations of Chinese Indonesians in asserting their Chineseness in the new political climate and the more diversified media environment. Through the constructivist approach to qualitative inquiry, the psychological themes become predominant and motivate those Chinese Indonesians to use media as distress-escaping means. The result shows that the era after the downfall of Suharto's authoritarian regime does not necessarily eliminate completely the discrimination against Chinese Indonesians by the indigenous people. The unrelieved psychological discomfort in the reformation era has led to an inference that the actual implementation of proclaimed renaissance in the post-Suharto era is somewhat illusory. This phenomenon has shown that the different social economic condition will somehow change the construction of identity of Chinese Indonesians as well.

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## 1. Introduction

The meanings of Chineseness today are “shifting and varied” (Meerwald, 2002). Its diversified connotations largely depend on the historical context, cultural experience, and the new global circumstances. Wang, L. L.-c. (1991) argued that “there is no single Chinese identity in the United States or in the world of Chinese diaspora”. Instead, recently, the global power of China, commonly referred to as “the rise of China”, has been a ground for the unstable identity for most Chinese all over the world.

Ang (2013) stated that “China’s international reputation was transformed from one of the backwaters of history to the country that many onlookers consider the premier rising global superpower”. Following the “rise of China” (Kuehn, et al., 2013), a number of scholars stated that an overwhelming feeling of admiration, along with an emotional attachment to their homeland were still embedded in most diasporic Chinese wherever they are. “In tandem with the growing international political and economic stature of China, Chinese-Singaporean can discern the confident assertion and promotion of Chinese identity” (Tan, 2003). In addition, “many second-generation Chinese Canadians in Vancouver, considered as a Global City, are interested in their family’s heritage and beginning to systematically compile their histories (Wickberg, 2007).

China’s global power does not only provoke the diasporic Chinese’ emotional ties to China, but also evokes anxiety and feeling detached from China. Ang (2013), as a diasporic Chinese who was born in Indonesia, received her formative education in the Netherlands, and has lived and worked in Australia since 1990s, has kept her Chinese identity ambiguous, indefinite, and undecided. In addition, Meerwald (2002) argued that, as a *mottled* Chinese, she stood in the indeterminate space that enabled her to interrogate the norms that continue to inflict immense force on her negotiations of Chineseness. Those facts indicate that there has been an ambiguity of ethnic subjectivication experienced by some overseas Chinese.

The Chinese in Indonesia are very diverse and can be identified differently in different periods and regions (Hoon, 2006). It is commonly shared that Chinese Indonesians lived in Indonesia experienced inappropriate and unjust treatment from the late 16th century until the late 1990s. It started from the Dutch colonial times up to the era of Suharto, the second president of Indonesia. The political repression the different generations of Chinese Indonesians had to deal with occurred under different regime and political circumstances, but the worst condition happened during the period of Suharto’s authoritarian rule (1966-1998). In the era of Suharto, the government prohibited the use of Chinese characters in public spaces, the import of Chinese-language publications, and all forms and expressions that could be traced to be of Chinese cultural origin (Tan, 1999). Up to the mid-1980s, the 200 million population was entertained with the sole television channel allowed, the state-owned Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI), which was filled with official rituals and ideological indoctrination (Dawis, 2009). The monotonous programs broadcast and the infrequent presence of Chinese Indonesians “as the subject matter of the film texts” in Indonesian cinema surprisingly led to the popularity of Chinese films and serials from Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Taiwan which were served as the distress-escaping means (Sen, 2006).

The China's increasingly prominent presence on the world stage has been followed by the global reach of Chinese cultural production. In the last decade, as stated by Kuehn, et al. (2013), a number of anthologies have been published that have begun to investigate the role of Chinese culture producers and cultural products in the network of nation, diaspora, identity, community, and communication. This transnational flow of ideas, by means of Chinese cultural products, served as the "symbolic vehicle" (Swidler, 1986), is somehow aimed at reaching a Chinese homogenous ideology throughout the world, regardless the complex meanings of Chineseness today. In the post Suharto era, when the cultural and political hardship is no longer an issue, and transnationalism and globalization have indeed become prominent issues, studies of ethnic Chinese identity in relation with issues of diaspora, transnationalism, and the rise of China recently have been the academic area of interest.

There have been a number of notable scholars (Budiman, 2005; Heryanto, 2008; Suryadinata, 2008) who have researched the portrait of Chinese Indonesians in the post-Suharto era. What those researches have in common is that Chinese Indonesians still fear of the rekindled "latent anti-Chinese feeling" (Budiman, 2005) due to the "growing social gap between Chinese and Non Chinese" (Suryadinata, 2008) and residual "ethnic stereotyping" (Budiman, 2005) represented in post-1998 films. In addition, there have been a few researches on how Chinese Indonesians were represented in the post Suharto Indonesian films (Sen, 2006; Tickel, 2009; Setijadi, 2013). However, those previous studies pay more attention on how the Chinese Indonesians' so-called conflicting identities are constructed in post-Suharto films. What the preceding studies are lacking is how actually those Chinese Indonesians today perceive their selves in real life. Even more, how the media products influence their identities in the new political climate and the much more diversified media environment will be an interesting study as well. This paper attempts to discover how the transnational media products from China influence the process of identity formation of the new generations of Chinese Indonesians in the contemporary cultural politics. In order to gain a complete understanding of Chinese Indonesians identity formation, the author chose a mixed-method study, which involved participant observation, in-depth interviews and written survey (questionnaire).

## **2. History of Chinese Indonesians and Identity**

The first Chinese migrants to Indonesia primarily came from four ethnic groups, predominantly from the two provinces of Fujian and Guangdong in Southeast China and occupied the Eastern Indonesia, Central and East Java, the West and East coast of Sumatra, the Riau islands, and Kalimantan (Turner, 2003). As soon as modes of transportation were invented, Chinese started to migrate from villages to cities for better opportunities, and to outside China between 12th and 20th century as well. History has shown that ethnic Chinese in Indonesia has always been put in difficult situation ever since the period of Dutch colonization (1596 – 1942), due to "its divide et impera (divide and conquer) policy" (Simbolon, 2005). The policy against Chinese continued into the Japanese Occupation (1942 – 1945) and the Sukarno period (1945-1967).

The fact is that throughout history, the worst condition of Chinese Indonesians occurs during the legacy of Suharto's 31-year rule (1966-1998) (New Order), the second president of Indonesia. As emphasized by Chua (2004), the process of exclusion against ethnic Chinese includes marginalization, discrimination, and stigmatization. Those processes are designed to develop negative stereotypes about Chinese Indonesians, which led into Anti-Chinese sentiment and riots directed by the indigenous people. However, the ethnic violence addressed by native Indonesians, somehow remind Chinese Indonesians of their cultural background; their Chineseness. A notable scholar who studied how the Chinese Indonesians who grew up during Suharto's New Order maintained their Chineseness through the media is Dawis (2009).

For most Chinese Indonesians at that time, there was combination of visual exotica and narrative familiarity while watching Chinese dramas, in which their viewing pleasure comes from both the spectatorial desire to see the 'exotic China' and the familiarity and comfort of narrative convention and the experience (Sun, 2002). The transmitted Chinese cultural values and rituals somehow contribute to the formation of Chinese identity. As stated by Mercer (1990), "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty". However, it is undeniable that the Chinese Indonesians identity construction was not completely developed since their freedom of expression was obviously eroded by the authorities.

Compared with the era when Chinese had to struggle to define their identity, after the Suharto's resignation, Chinese Indonesians had been given alternatives to express their identity. As emphasized by Hoon (2006), a consequence of this was not only the awakening of Chinese identity reflected in the formation of Chinese political parties and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but also the revival of Chinese culture, religion, language, press, and media. It marked the beginning of democratization (reformation) and re-emergence of Chinese Indonesians in various aspects of life. It also triggered the rise of identity politics across the whole Indonesian society (Hoon, 2006).

The political climate in the Suharto era is certainly different from the post-Suharto era in terms of democratization, but Indonesia has never really embarked on a democratic course. Indonesia has been seen to settle into a "gray zone" where autocratic and democratic features are combined. There has been a sequence of stages towards a flowering of democracy which has been rejected. The emergence of ethnic conflicts has been an important factor limiting democratization in Indonesia. Sensitive issues related with ethnic-minority do still exist, even though in a lesser number of cases. What can be said about the post Suharto era is that the proclaimed democracy seems ceremonial. What most Chinese Indonesians experience today is a "pseudo renaissance", in which the actual implementation of renaissance itself is somewhat illusory.

### **3. Developing Self-Control: Maintaining Conformity with the Indigenous People**

#### **3.1. Unsettled Remains: Unsuccessful Multiculturalism**

The Suharto's declaration of his resignation did not only lead to the re-emergence of Chinese culture, but also engendered the multiculturalism in Indonesia. Most of scholars share a common understanding in which multiculturalism puts an emphasis on the 'coexistence and equal representation of different cultures and peoples within a nation state' (Hoon, 2006). In spite of the fact that Indonesia is rich in cultural diversity with hundreds of different ethnic groups, including Chinese Indonesians, a congenial atmosphere has not been created during Suharto's New Order period. Multiculturalism represented in the state ideology of *Pancasila* and national motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is merely an ideal.

Multiculturalism has been unsuccessful since the majority of indigenous people experience an intense feeling of fear of being culturally and politically dominated and controlled by Chinese Indonesians. This paranoia has its roots in Dutch colonial era, when "the Chinese were accorded special privileges and served as 'middle men' and tax collectors for the Dutch" (Dawis, 2009), while the indigenous Indonesians were placed on the lower class in their own land. This resentment against Chinese had been exacerbated throughout Suharto's rule, wherein Suharto successfully shaped the supposition that Indonesia's economic sectors were gradually dominated by Chinese Indonesians. This has caused undesirable psychological response from indigenous people whenever Chinese Indonesians were granted equal treatment. Even though Indonesia has entered the Post-Suharto era, the residual hatred and anxiety against Chinese Indonesians still exists and hinder the implementation of multiculturalism in Indonesia.

Based on the interview conducted to mostly Chinese Indonesians in their 20s and 30s with a wide range of careers, the problems with Chinese occurred during Suharto era were still there, overwhelming their mind. A number of interviewees whom I interviewed showed the same stance they took toward the question of Chineseness. Irene, for example, a medical doctor in her early 30s, distanced herself from an opinion about Chinese culture by being indifferent. Another interviewee, Esty, a devout Christian and a civil servant, spontaneously express her feelings of dislike against any questions regarding her Chinese identity. This situation somehow indicates that both Irene and Esty's existence as a minority group has not been totally recognized.

The main reason for the unfavorable multiculturalism is the ignorance of socio-psychological condition of Chinese Indonesians. The long repressive assimilation imposed by Suharto dictatorship has inevitably a long-term psychological effect upon Chinese Indonesians. They were not able to assert their original cultural identity, and neither were they fully accepted as Indonesians. Up to the present, Chinese Indonesians are caught in "the in-betweenness of the displaced" (Goldman and Saul, 2006), due to the unpleasant emotion caused by the remaining belief that indigenous people is likely to cause pain or threat one way or another.

### **3.2. Developing Self Control: Maintaining Conformity with Indigenous People**

The state of being psychologically uncomfortable motivated them to achieve consonance regardless of the fact that they continuously suffered from discrimination. Striving for internal consistency for more than three decades unquestionably results in

psychological trauma for most Chinese Indonesians. It needs time to change the way Chinese Indonesians think about Indonesians after being alienated for a long period of time. In addition, to totally remove the unequal treatment against Chinese Indonesians in the post Suharto era is a long way process. The resistance of most Chinese Indonesians who were interviewed towards the questions of Chineseness reflects their reluctance to being labeled “Chinese”.

### **3.2.1. Unspoken Cultural Blending**

Instead of publicly announcing the real identity of Chinese, Chinese Indonesians chose the cultural blending with the local culture as another way for them to overcome the identity confusion. The maintenance of Chinese identity does not rigidly keep their cultural purity, but it suggests an alternative way of increasing the Chinese Indonesians cultural belonging in local life. It cannot be denied that Chinese cultural elements have been gradually absorbed with Indonesian culture. Many forms of cultural absorption can be observed, such as code mixing and word borrowing. The hybrid phenomenon can be seen in the mixed use of language in the Chinese Indonesians daily conversation. Based on the interview to a number of Chinese Indonesians, they frequently mentioned about the Indonesian version of Chinese new year, *imlek*, along with their Betawi’s words which are derived from Southern Hokkien dialect after being asked about Chinese new year. Those phenomena represent the occurrence of language convergence. The Hokkien dialect which came in contact with the local language resulted in some mutually intelligible words.

Another intermingle culture between Chinese and Indonesian Cuisine can be seen in some of the famous cuisines in Indonesia. Tan (2002) argued that better picture of the influence of Chinese ingredients and foods can be examined from the loanwords originating from the Chinese, mostly Hokkien, used in the Indonesian language, such as *bakmi*, *kuetiao*, *bihun*, *bakso*, *juhi*, *cumi*, *lobak*, *tim*, *Hainan*, *capcai*, *pangsit*, and *kuachi*. A study by Christanti explored Chinese acculturation on various culinary noodles. Many types of noodle dishes represent the local cuisine traditions in Indonesia. Based on her research, the acculturation level does not only apply in culinary (noodle) aspect, but also in daily interactions among the Chinese descent people and local Indonesians.

Those Chinese influences on local culture have been so well integrated into Indonesian mainstream culture that many Indonesians today might not recognize their Chinese-origin and considered them as their own. By silently and invisibly penetrating their cultural values and norms into the specific localities, Chinese culture is well embedded in a larger Indonesian culture. Therefore, as a diasporic Chinese, Chinese Indonesians will not completely lose their Chineseness and will somehow be able to restore their Chinese identity.

### **3.2.2. A Contradiction Between Written and Oral**

The observable entangled identity of Chinese Indonesians occurs when they want to retain their Chineseness through the cultural influence in the local culture, but on the other hand, they are unwilling to be called “Chinese”. Their claim of being pure Indonesians reflects their tacit identity that they keep fully submerged but implanted and preoccupied their thoughts. Most interviewees were disinclined to express their

Chineseness and kept their pride in being Chinese hidden. They stated that their Chinese language were poor, but on the other hand, referring to the answers to the questionnaire, the majority of respondents evaluated their Chinese proficiency as good. Moreover, they demonstrate their positive attitude about becoming a fluent Chinese speaker and their dignity of having Chinese names.

Surprisingly, most of the respondents wrote in Chinese a number of Chinese movie titles that they liked to watch in the past and they are currently watching in the questionnaires. The most frequently mentioned movies are *Kung Fu Dunk* (2008) and *The Monkey King* (2014). When author re-confirmed their favorite Chinese films, they repeatedly stated they chose Chinese programs when they have no other preferences. Korean and American entertainment programs are what they are actually inclined to watch. This condition reflects the fact that they silently formed and sustained their Chineseness and as well indicates the Chinese Indonesians' psychological pressure when dealing with face to face interview. On the other hand, while answering the questionnaire, they tend to less likely to feel tense due to the absence of eye contact. Hence, they could freely express their true feelings.

The unfavorable multiculturalism has indeed led to an entangled identity, in which Chinese Indonesians experience conflicts over identity. These conflicts occur when Chinese Indonesians feel that their sense of self are threatened, therefore they will actively avoid situations which would likely increase tension between Chinese Indonesians and *pribumi*<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, they sometimes firmly state their sense of belonging to Indonesia, but in particular occasions, they express their pride for their ethnicity. Even the cultural blending does not eventually lead to a freedom to publicly express their cultural identity. This ambivalent identity is caused by unresolved psychological pain, in which the discrimination against ethnic Chinese until now still exists. Instead of openly speak their identity, Chinese Indonesians forced them selves into silence, in order to secure their peace of mind.

### **3.2.3. Media Use: Distress-Escaping Means**

The remaining mental discomfort experienced by most Chinese Indonesians and cynicism expressed by the indigenous people on certain occasions have provoked those Chinese Indonesians to turn to the media as distress-escaping means. Media, here, plays an important role in the construction, negotiation, and maintenance of cultural identity. The construction begins when the external inputs to the brain allow individual to recall their memories and build up their "other" identity. The process of constructing identity will be complicated for the Chinese Indonesians who have to deal with contradictory values or ideas. This process will finally reach the final level, i.e. the maintenance of their identity. Some respondents talked about their favorite movies while relating to their identity formation.

The secondhand memories, the term used to "describe the ambivalent inheritance of memory from older generations" (Watson, 2013), are in the form of Chinese traditions and cultures. Those which have been internalized by Chinese Indonesians become their semi-conscious selves-identity. This subliminal identity will be activated by the Chinese cultural images and values visualized and delivered by television. The process of identity formation includes the consciousness created,

consciousness rising, and consciousness solidified. It is argued that the degree to which the respondents maintained their Chineseness through the media is linked with personal factors, such as families, religions, gender, and regional origins (Dawis, 2009). The self-identification also takes influence from the parental influence and guidance. On one hand, media became a mirror of reality because they could connect with aspects of Chinese cultural values and traditions that they also experienced in Indonesia in some ways. On the other hand, media presented China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan as a desired other - depicting expectations and norms that were different from their lives in Indonesia. The Chinese Indonesians will arrive at the state of Consciousness created when they engage in behavioral responses to the external stimuli provoked by the media. The historical background of China and the cultural context portrayed in most martial arts films play a significant role in creating the Chinese Indonesians' consciousness of their Chinese identity. In this case, the filial piety in Confucian philosophy, the warrior ethos, and bonds of brotherhood are some emotion-provoking themes which will contribute to the construction of Chinese Indonesians identity.

Their determined attempt to maintain their Chinese identity under the psychological distress is possibly due to the role of Chinese films which are imported either from Mainland China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. Recently, China has been aspired to increase its TV export in which an additional ideological weight is unavoidably added to the "going-global" policy (Xu, 2013) considering the fact that Korean dramas were found to occupy 25 percent of broadcasting schedules of Chinese TV stations (Wu, 2007). Xu (2013) furthermore added that China-made TV programs kept on losing its audiences in overseas markets while those charming TV series made by regional producers have taken a large number of viewership away. According to the interview that I did with a number of young generations of Chinese Indonesians, most of them are still willing to watch Chinese movies and TV series, especially those with historical and cultural theme, which somehow will contribute to their identity formation.

The majority of respondents stated that they were psychologically relieved while watching martial arts films. Their memories provoked by the media along with their imagination of living in a constant state of peace in their 'mythic homeland' has contributed to the formation of their 'hidden identity', i.e. Chinese identity. Even though they could not easily express their Chineseness, they could somehow develop their unspoken identity by means of media. Their long-term memories provoked by the retrieval cues co-exists with the present condition. The current situation wherein those new generation of Chinese Indonesians are still treated less favorably than *pribumi* has caused a sudden "wake up call" which allows them to get back to reality and silently maintain their Chineseness.

## **4. Conclusion**

### **4.1. Summary**

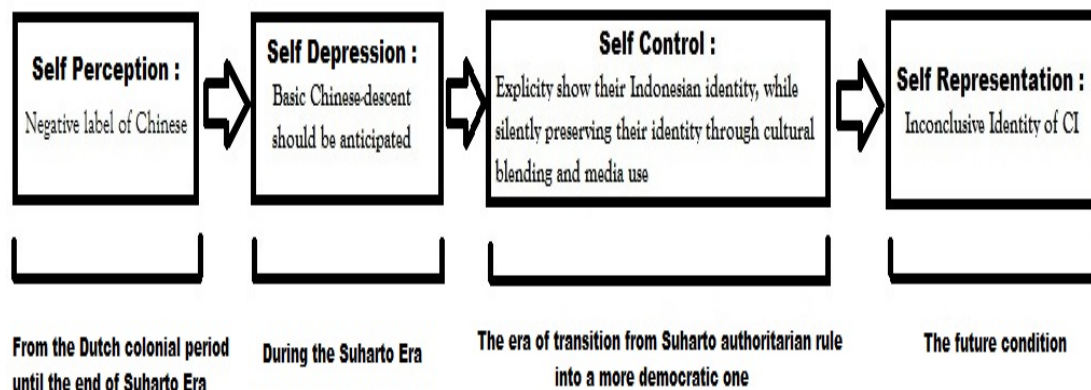
Chinese Indonesians have gone through four main phases of evolutions. Each phase represents specific cultural and political condition Chinese Indonesians experience, which eventually shapes their self-image. They were formed based on their



understanding of how others perceive them. Knowing what the majority thinks of them as a minority somehow leads to self-doubt and feelings of insecurity. According to the American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929), the degree of personal insecurity you display in social situations is determined by what you believe other people think of you. “Low self-esteem and poor self-image has long been associated with a whole range of psychological problems” (Isaksen, 2013).

Based on the data collection and analysis, the psychological themes of Chinese Indonesians in particular era were the recurrent and fundamental themes in this research. The different social economic condition will somehow change the construction of identity of Chinese Indonesians. The negative labeling against Chinese Indonesians for decades, from the Dutch colonial period until the end of Suharto era, has become the social stigma that make the formation of their Chinese identity more complex and confusing. Their negative self-perception has been fostered by perceptions and opinions of the majority. During the Dutch colonial rule, the prejudice about Chinese Indonesians has been passed down from generation to generation, as a result of divide and rule policy implemented by Dutch. In the Suharto era, as a consequence of both forced assimilationist policy and Dutch’s *divide et impera*, Chinese Indonesians were even more depressed. Moreover, during this period, they were subjected to the cruelest forms of indignity and violence.

Meanwhile, in the more democratic era, Chinese Indonesians are still considered inferior, even though to a lesser degree of conflict. The multiculturalism, which most scholars assumed would occur in Indonesia, is to a certain degree, unsuccessful. Another form of ‘phobia’ is discovered when most respondents demonstrate their psychological discomfort which has led to their ‘entangled identity’. Therefore, the social stigma results in their anticipated actions when dealing with any questions related to Chinese identity. They unconsciously have established their self-perception during the Suharto era; “being the descendants of Chinese is negative, thus you have to express denial of being addressed as Chinese”. This condition urges them to strive for internal consistency even after the downfall of Suharto, wherein they would explicitly show their Indonesian identity, while silently maintaining their Chinese identity through cultural blending and the media use. Their self-control occurs when they are trying to achieve consonance with the ‘mainstream’ identity. This will finally leads them to inconclusive identity of Chinese Indonesians in the future which is reflected in the inconsistencies between oral and written statement. Their evolution of identity formation can be mapped as follows:



**Figure 1. Identity evolution of Chinese Indonesians**

## 4.2. Contribution

It has been argued that the rise of China has provoked pride among diasporic Chinese who reside in particular regions, but to some Chinese-descent people who live in countries that do not completely support multiculturalism, it has stimulated anxiety. The different geographical boundaries would influence the different process of identity formation of diasporic Chinese throughout the world. In the case of Indonesia with its political and cultural turbulence throughout history, Chinese Indonesians has been overwhelmed by the state of in-betweenness. Even today, the political and cultural cleavage between the majority (indigenous people) and minority (Chinese Indonesians) still exists, which in turn enhances the state of ambivalence. This condition contradicts the notion that diasporic Chinese still share commonalities of being Chinese. It supports Meerworld's (2002) statement that the meanings of Chineseness today are "shifting and varied". In Indonesia, being Chinese is problematic and complex. The ability to control their behavior and desires in the face of external demands is necessary to maintain harmony with the majority.

### Notes

1. Pribumi : An Indonesian term which refers to the indigenous population (Suryadinata, 2008).

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