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# How to be Chinese: Ethnic Chinese Experience a 'Reawakening' of their Chinese Identity

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## **Ethnic Chinese experience a 'reawakening' of their Chinese identity**

### **Chang-Yau Hoon**

The post-Suharto era is an exciting period for Chinese Indonesians and other minority ethnic groups in Indonesia. After over three decades of cultural and political repression, Chinese Indonesians are now being given the opportunity to express their identity. The re-emergence of Chinese religion, language, and press in Indonesia since the end of the New Order, has had a significant impact on the development of ethnic Chinese identity.

The strongly anti-Chinese sentiment expressed in the May 1998 riots in Jakarta and elsewhere in Indonesia, including the looting of Chinese-owned shops and businesses and the racially-motivated rapes, drastically altered the position of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. Psychologists from the University of Indonesia who studied the post-trauma experience of Indonesian Chinese have pointed to the identity crisis they experienced in the aftermath of the riots.

The political violence of May 1998 showed that despite their efforts to identify themselves as Indonesians, ethnic Chinese were unable to escape their 'Chineseness'. Yet one of the consequences of the riots has been a resurgence of Chinese identity. In the period since the fall of Suharto, Chinese political parties and non-government organisations have been formed and Chinese culture, religion, language and press revived. Ethnic Chinese took advantage of the democratisation process brought about by reformasi to liberate their long-suppressed identity and cultural heritage.

### **Learning Chinese language**

In September 1998, President B. J. Habibie carried out legislative reform to end the official use of the discriminatory labels pribumi (indigenous) and non-pribumi, a move many saw as aimed at erasing the distinction between 'indigenous-ness' and 'foreignness'. In May 1999, Habibie issued a presidential instruction to allow the teaching of the Chinese language and abolished a regulation requiring ethnic Chinese to produce certificates of citizenship when registering for school or making official applications.

Following this decree, Chinese language experienced a revival in Indonesia. Among young ethnic Chinese, learning Mandarin has become a popular pursuit, triggering a proliferation of after-school and after-work Mandarin courses. These courses were in even greater demand

after Abdurrahman Wahid lifted the 1978 official ban on the display of Chinese characters and the importation of Chinese publications in February 2001.

The government's encouragement of the use of Chinese language continued even after Wahid was ousted. In 2002, Megawati declared her support for Chinese education and for Sinology departments to be established in Indonesian universities. Since then, many Chinese language tuition centers have sprung up in Indonesia's major cities, Chinese language as a subject has been included in some school curricula and Chinese studies centres have been established in various universities.

Despite this recent interest in Chinese language education in Indonesia, ethnic Chinese are unlikely to become more 'Chinese' as a result. Learning Mandarin does not necessarily mean they identify less as 'Indonesian' (and hence more 'Chinese'), nor does it indicate an orientation towards China. In fact, most young ethnic Chinese learn Mandarin for economic reasons rather than for cultural or political reasons. Learning their ancestral language is a means of becoming more competitive in the job market, not a way to discover their Chinese roots.

## **Cultural freedoms**

Under Wahid's administration, ethnic Chinese were also given greater freedom to assert their cultural and religious identity. Presidential Decree No. 6/2000 annulled the discriminatory regulation (Presidential Decree No. 14/1967) banning public displays of Chinese beliefs, customs and traditions. In issuing this decree, President Wahid assured the ethnic Chinese of their right to observe their cultural practice in the same way that other ethnic groups had enjoyed theirs.

Following the amendment of the official cultural policy, ethnic Chinese were able to celebrate Imlek (Chinese New Year) publicly and without restrictions for the first time in over three decades. In January 2001, Wahid went a step further, declaring Imlek an optional holiday. In February 2002, Megawati declared Imlek a national holiday beginning in the year 2003. This edict further established the cultural rights of the ethnic Chinese and marks a landmark decision.

However, despite these positive signs of Chinese cultural freedoms, racial discrimination in Indonesia is far from over. At least 50 discriminative laws and ordinances were still in force in 2004. For instance, despite government declarations to the contrary and unlike other Indonesians, ethnic Chinese are still required to produce certificates of citizenship every time

they apply for official documents such as identification cards and passports. In February 2002, prior to Imlek, the Chinese were warned by Jakarta's Governor, Sutiyoso, to celebrate the festival in a 'low-key' way, in order to avoid jealousy from society. This statement implied that anti-Chinese sentiment is still present and is fuelled by perceptions of inequalities of wealth. More positively, Chinese New Year celebrations in 2004 passed without incident.

## **Being Chinese and Indonesian**

With the emergence of identity politics and the resurgence of Chinese organisations, religion, language, and press in Indonesia, many ethnic Chinese have begun to identify with their Chinese roots. But after generations of integration with the local community, Indonesian Chineseness has inevitably been shaped by local cultures. Being a Chinese Indonesian is not the same as being a Chinese Singaporean, or for that matter, being from mainland China or Taiwan.

It is tempting to think that Chinese ethnicity is something fixed and indisputable and that China represents the authentic Chinese identity. This view suggests that Chinese Indonesians are 'less-than-pure' Chinese. Further, it assumes there is a 'true' Chinese cultural identity, which the Indonesian Chinese community in Indonesia lacks. Such a view has been prevalent among some older generation Chinese Indonesians. This generation tends to construct an idealised ancestral homeland despite the reality of living in a multi-ethnic nation.

Until these recent changes in the law ethnic Chinese have lived in a country that they have been unable to call home. A place where they are perceived as 'aliens' regardless of how much they assimilate because nationhood is defined in terms of belonging to a suku bangsa, an ethnic group with a homeland in the archipelago. By holding on to conservative ideas of what it is to be Chinese — as many in the older generation do — ethnic Chinese Indonesians are in danger of reinforcing their image as 'outsiders' and 'foreigners'. This is an image many Chinese have been desperately trying to shed.

It is crucial to understand Chineseness as constantly changing. Ethnic identity is not based upon intrinsic characteristics such as race, blood, tradition and ancestry but varies from generation to generation and is shaped by local circumstances.