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The Chinese of Karimun: Citizenship and Belonging at Indonesia's Margins

Lenore Lyons and Michele Ford

Like many parts of Riau Islands Province (Kepri), the island of Karimun has a much higher proportion of Chinese than most other areas of Indonesia. In 1930, the Chinese – the majority of them newcomers – represented more than one third of the total population in Karimun and Bintan (Ng 1976: 19-20).[1] By the year 2000 over 85 percent of Chinese living in the islands were born in the province (Ananta *et al*. 2008: 35). Many in the community can now trace their roots back three or four generations. At the same time, however, the location of the islands directly south of Singapore (see Figure 1) has meant that they continue to have opportunities for frequent contact with family and business associates across the Straits.

These ongoing social and economic ties, and the maintenance of Chinese cultural and linguistic practices, could be interpreted as evidence of the Chinese population's lack of engagement with Indonesia's modern nation-building project and by association of their foreignness. However, Chinese identities (and loyalties) are not always scaled in ethno-nationalist terms. In this chapter, we examine the ways in which Chinese living in the Riau Islands think about themselves as being both Chinese *and* Indonesian. We begin with a brief overview of the history of the Chinese in the Riau Islands and a discussion of the impact that the 2006 Citizenship Law has had on Chinese living in the towns and villages of Karimun. We then turn our attention to the links between identity and cultural practice and the attitudes of Karimun Chinese to Singapore. In doing so, we seek to draw attention to the social dynamics of ethnicity and class in Indonesia's periphery, and how they differ from those at the center.

We argue that the localized expression of Chinese Indonesian identity in Karimun suggests a need to move beyond a focus on integration versus assimilation to an analysis of how identity and belonging are tied to a sense of place.[2] As this chapter shows, in making sense of their position in Indonesia's periphery, Karimun's Chinese community makes reference to a series of binaries – native-born versus foreign-born; center (Jakarta) versus periphery (Riau islands); islanders versus newcomers; and Indonesian versus Singaporean/Malaysian – that serve to structure their accounts of identity and belonging. These binaries are constantly

negotiated through interconnected processes of resistance to assimilation and acculturation to a Karimun "way of life."

The Chinese in the Riau Islands

The earliest Chinese residents in the Riau Islands were Teochius. who were brought to Bintan between 1734 and 1740 to open up gambier plantations.[3] By 1784 there were an estimated 10,000 Chinese pepper and gambier planters on Bintan (Trocki 1979: 20). Over time. more Teochius arrived from mainland Sumatra to work as rubber planters and in coconut plantations. The islands also played a key role in cross-straits trade. By the 1780s:

> Riau had leaped to prosperity on the basis of the expanded junk trade from Southern China, the settlement of Chinese pepper and gambier planters, and the growth of trade in the archipelago. The locally settled Chinese merchants also carried on a thriving trade with "smugglers" who carried Bangka's tin to Riau ... Likewise, the Chinese "kongsi" settlements in the interior of western Borneo, which had opened gold mines at Montrado and other sites on the Kapuas River were other markets which received British opium via Riau.
>
> (Trocki 1999: 55)

When Riau was abandoned by the sultanate in 1784, large numbers of Malays and Bugis left the islands but the Chinese chose to remain (Trocki 1979: 30). During this period, which Trocki (1979: 32) describes as a "period of virtual independence," the Chinese developed their own institutions of political and economic control such as Chinese secret societies and revenue farms. By 1825, there were over 13,000 Chinese settled on five different rivers in Bintan, living under a "purely Chinese power structure," centered in Tanjung Pinang and Senggarang (Trocki 1979: 32). When the Dutch returned to take possession of the islands in the early 1800s, they found that they were able to exercise very little control over Chinese affairs.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese-owned sawmills provided another employment opportunity for Chinese immigrants. For the next few decades, most Chinese were rural wage laborers employed on plantations, in tin mines and in timber or fuel camps, supplying wood and charcoal to the growing market in Singapore. Hokkien migrants arrived in the islands in greater numbers in the early part of the twentieth century and began to dominate in trade with Singapore and Malaya through a complicated network of distribution and collection.[4] Hokkien Chinese gradually replaced the Teochius as economic leaders in Tanjung Pinang, but Teochius continued to dominate numerically and economically in Karimun. Hokkien *totok* business interests expanded further during the Japanese Occupation (1942-45) and the ensuing revolutionary period (1945-49), when they began to dominate trade between Singapore and the Riau Islands. This form of trade (which the Dutch regarded as smuggling) gave rise to a new breed of Chinese businessmen and displaced the pre-war Chinese elite.

Chinese import-export organizations (*lianhao*), particularly those based in Singapore, played a pivotal role in confronting the Dutch and sustaining trade with Republican areas.[5] As time went by, the Republic became more and more reliant on these smuggling networks. This has

led Twang (1998: 196) to argue that "Paradoxically, it was the *totok* – the least assimilated of the Chinese – who were in a far better position to contribute economically to the Indonesian revolution through smuggling." By November 1947, however, blockades brought an end to the golden age of smuggling, and 90 percent of trade ended up back in the hands of Dutch firms. Chinese businessmen began to sell off their boats and foreign trade was normalized through a Dutch-introduced banking system developed to control foreign exchange (Twang 1998: 234-35). The islands remained under Dutch control, not becoming part of the Republic until 1949.

Figure 1 Singapore and the Riau Islands

In the immediate post-Independence years, many Chinese traders struggled to make a living, as the majority of small-scale merchants had little capital to invest and were severely affected by fluctuations in commodity prices. As in most other parts of Indonesia, the Riau Islands Chinese were able to reach an accommodation with the authorities when rural trading by non-citizen Chinese was banned under Presidential Decree No. 10/1959. Indeed, according to Mackie (1976: 96-97), while the ban was applied in the nearby islands of Bangka and Belitung, in Riau – which he describes as "a Navy-controlled area, very close to Singapore" – " the authorities admitted that implementation would be difficult." It nevertheless appears to have had an effect on small traders in rural areas of Bintan. In Tanjung Uban, a small town in the north of Bintan, many Hailamese and Hakka store owners left and returned to Singapore (Ng 1976: 41). Those who remained were able to continue their businesses through wives or children who were Indonesian citizens.[6]

The older generation of Chinese businessmen suffered further significant losses when free trade was cut between Singapore, Indonesia and Malaya with Confrontation, in part because

the banking sector was heavily dependent on money markets in Singapore and Malaya. During this period, Hokkien merchants were replaced by a "new group of adventurous businessmen" (Ng 1976: 51), whose chances of success were dependent on their initial capital and access to local military authorities, whose patronage was essential in order to cross the border. Although a number of Chinese made their fortunes during this period by acquiring permits to run monopolies for certain goods (e.g. cloves or copra), a large number of Chinese-owned businesses closed down and many Chinese left Indonesia in search of new lives across the Straits.

Despite these setbacks, trade in the Riau Islands continued to be dominated by the Chinese merchants who imported goods from Singapore and distributed them to Java and Sumatra through Barak and Chinese vendors from Medan. As evidence of the significance of the Chinese involvement in trade, Esmara (1975: 29) claims that in the 1970s, "A Chinese businessman's handwritten note in Chinese characters may carry as much weight as a government bank cheque anywhere in Riau." However, not all Chinese in the islands were involved in trade. Many continued to work on smallholdings on remote islands in the archipelago, and Teochiu smallholders and workers who migrated to Bintan from smaller islands filled the vacuum left by earlier waves of departures in the wake of Confrontation (Ng 1976: 42). Many of these new arrivals eked out a living in Tanjung Uban, but the lack of local employment forced younger Chinese to find work as sailors on international vessels or as construction workers, cooks and laundresses (Ng 1976: 46).

Since the 1970s, the economic position of the Chinese population in the Riau Islands has shifted in line with changing demographic patterns, growing urbanization and new employment opportunities associated with multinational industrial investment. From a numerically large proportion of the population in the early part of the twentieth century, the relative size of the Chinese population in the Riau Islands as a whole has gradually declined as a consequence of growing levels of in-migration from other parts of lndonesia.[7] While almost 80 percent of Chinese lived in rural areas in the 1970s (Ng 1976: 25), Chinese now account for more than 11 percent of urban dwellers and just 5.38 percent of the rural population (Ananta *et al.* 2008).[8] There is now considerable variation in the concentration of the Chinese population in the islands, reflecting differences in migration patterns of non-Chinese Indonesian migrants. On Karimun, at the time of the 2000 census, the Chinese accounted for a relatively high 13.8 percent of the population (Ananta *et al*. 2008: 38).

Identity and cultural practice

While there is growing scholarly recognition of the heterogeneity of Indonesia's Chinese populations, it is widely believed that cultural expressions of Chineseness were completely banned under the New Order (Hoon 2008: 53). Amongst the regulations that are said to have eradicated public expressions of Chinese culture was the prohibition on public celebrations of Chinese religious and cultural festivals in 1967, and the declaration that Confucianism was not a recognized religion in 1979 (Hoon 2008: 42-43). Under the Suharto regime, the use of the Chinese language in public places was strongly discouraged, and printed material in Chinese characters was deemed a prohibited import. Hoon (2008: 53) claims that the “limited

documentation of ethnic Chinese agency in preserving and maintaining Chinese language and culture during the New Order era" resulted from this ban on public displays of Chinese culture and tradition rather than from an absence of practice.

However, pressure upon Chinese to limit public displays of language and culture was far greater in Java than in Chinese strongholds like West Kalimantan, North Sumatra and the Riau Islands. Indeed, in the Riau Islands, there was little impetus for the Chinese community to modify their behavior under the New Order, and so islanders did not feel the need to resort to practicing culture and language "secretly" (Hoon 2008: 53), as they did in many other parts of Indonesia. These differences imply community support in the outer islands, but also relative tolerance on the part of the state. We have argued elsewhere that state practices in the Riau borderlands are neither omnipresent nor monolithic, but rather constitute a structural response to the intersection between national and local regimes (Ford and Lyons 2011). Local officials, keenly aware of the flaws (and limited reach) of national legal frameworks, frequently respond to "illegal" acts by turning a blind eye or actively intervening in cases where they deem the national law to be "wrong" for local circumstances.

The strength of linguistic and cultural practices in the islands is reflected in the ways in which individuals refer to themselves. While recent arrivals describe themselves as "Cina" or "Chinese" or "Tionghoa" when asked to describe their ethnicity (*suku*), locally born Chinese normally identify with their dialect-based ethnic group instead (e.g. Hokkien, Hakka, etc.). In fact, it is not uncommon for Chinese in the islands to speak their own and sometimes several other dialects as well as Mandarin. When asked to compare life in the islands and Jakarta. Elenawati, a 40-year-old florist, observed:

> It's easier to be Chinese in Balai [Tanjung Balai Karimun]. There are more Chinese here, so if I want to speak Teochiu or whatever language it's okay. The Chinese in Jakarta are all practically the same. They all speak Indonesian.

Similarly, Sutoyo noted that he speaks Hokkien freely in Karimun, but always speaks Indonesian when he visits Java. This was so, he said, because "Here we can use our languages and are not afraid to do so but there they speak Indonesian. There we feel that we should be a little prudent."

The fact that today several Chinese languages are widely spoken in the islands can be explained by the large percentage of Chinese in some communities, along with their lack of schooling, which has affected their fluency in Indonesian. However, it also reflects the presence of large numbers of Chinese-speaking tourists and businesspeople from Singapore and Malaysia, who converse with local Chinese in Mandarin, Hokkien or Teochiu. The Riau Islands' location in the borderlands has also long provided access to Mandarin radio and television programming from Singapore and Malaysia. As noted by Sutoyo, a 41-year-old hotelier from Tanjung Balai Karimun, growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, he and his friends usually watched the Mandarin channels and, as a consequence, could converse quite easily in Mandarin with Chinese visitors.

While middle- and upper-class Chinese in Java were able to preserve language by watching satellite TV in the 1980s (Hoon 2008: 56), the widespread presence of televisions in the islands – where television ownership has long been widespread due in large part to the flourishing smuggling industry {Ford and Lyons 2012) – meant that working-class Chinese families were also able to access foreign broadcasts in the 1970s and 1980s.[9] Riau Islanders were watching television broadcasts from Singapore in the 1970s, before television was available in Sumatra.[10] Even after Indonesian channels became available, Karimun residents had access only to poor-quality broadcasts of TVRI prior to the 1990s, but could easily pick up a range of channels from Singapore. Ah An, a 40-year-old car salesman in Karimun, claimed that, even today, middle-aged and older Chinese prefer watching Mandarin-language broadcasts from Singapore. Moreover, as Faucher notes in her study of young Indonesians living in Tanjung Pinang, while many non-Chinese islanders find Singapore and Malaysian channels boring and have difficulty understanding the Malay broadcasts, young Chinese eagerly consume Chinese popular culture (see Faucher 2007: 456 n.l6).

Architectural and cultural markers of Chineseness in the islands were also left largely untouched by the Suharto regime. The Chinese have a strong visible presence in urban centers and villages throughout the islands. Public symbols of Chinese culture include large temples as well as joss stick prayer offerings in Chinese-owned shops and homes. Even more remarkable, perhaps, than the ongoing expression of these symbols of Chinese culture is the fact that locally these practices are not viewed as the exclusive domain of the Chinese. Traveling on an inter-island ferry service in 2004, we observed Malay crew offering joss paper to the sea goddess on departure from the Batam ferry terminal to Karimun. On another trip, a Malay captain, who had completed the pilgrimage to Mecca, happily posed for a photograph in his wheelhouse in front of joss sticks, prayer fruit and a *bagua* (eight-sided *feng shui* mirror).

It is common knowledge also that Malays pray at the old Chinese temple at Senggarang on the island of Bintan for good luck when they gamble, since gambling is forbidden in Islam. In the 1970s and 1980s it was common for Malays and long-term immigrants to attend Chinese New Year celebrations, where the children received *ampau* (Hokkien: red-packet; *hongbao* in Mandarin). Muslims also sometimes distributed green *ampau* at Idul Fitri. These kinds of cultural exchanges have decreased in more recent decades as a result of newer waves of migration and the increasing religiosity of some Muslims, particularly in Batam and even Tanjung Pinang. But in Karimun and more remote island communities they remain a striking feature of everyday life. Ah Chan, a 42-year-old shopkeeper, described life in Meral, a small village in Karimun, as one based on strong family-like connections between Malays and Chinese, "We're like family. If it’s Lebaran, we take *lontong* [steamed rice cake] to their houses, if it's [Chinese] New Year, they bring us drinks."

Economic and social integration

Local people of all ethnic backgrounds in Karimun attribute the preservation of temples, tolerance toward public burning of joss paper and the widespread use of Chinese languages in public to strong inter-ethnic bonds between the Chinese and Malays. The majority of our

respondents saw no contradiction between their public and private expressions of Chineseness and being Indonesian. For them, identity was not a zero-sum game. Becoming more like a Jakartan Chinese by losing one's knowledge of Chinese language and culture (i.e. assimilating) would not make them Indonesian – something that is both a fact of birthplace and is reinforced through a commitment to the nation as demonstrated by the ties one forges in the community through schooling, employment, community and kinship ties. These community ties extend beyond the current generation and are reflected in the struggles, hard work and sacrifice experienced by all Riau Islanders, regardless of ethnicity.

Almost all the Chinese we spoke to described the relationship between the Chinese and the Malays as peaceful and based on mutual cooperation. Harmonious inter-ethnic relations are not only said to be characteristic of the workplace and schools. Erni – who was born in Jakarta of Chinese parents from West Kalimantan and moved to Karimun in 2000 with her Tanjung Pinang Chinese husband – attributed the lack of discrimination against the Chinese to intermarriage between the Chinese and Malays, and to strong inter-communal relations:

> That's why staying in Karimun is so safe... for the Chinese there is no fear or fanaticism that is excessive. If there is, it's probably because of ethnic groups from outside the Islands... we don't need to talk about which ones... but from the Malays which make up the biggest ethnic group and the Javanese there are no problems. We're like brother and sister.

The ability of the Chinese in Karimun to integrate in this way is the product of a number of inter-connected factors. One crucial factor that mitigates ethnic tension is the absence of clear class divisions between the Chinese and other communities in Karimun. There remains a great deal of class differentiation amongst the Chinese population. In addition to their established presence as shopkeepers, hoteliers and restaurateurs, it is not uncommon to see Chinese working as garbage collectors, hawkers or market stall holders. The diverse class locations of the Chinese living in Karimun (and other parts of the Riau Islands) sets this community apart from Chinese living in other parts of Indonesia, particularly Java, where their occupations, wealth and education mark them as different from the broader population. The Malays and others whom we spoke with were well aware that some Chinese in their communities experienced severe economic hardship and live in impoverished circumstances. In the face of such apparent need, it was difficult to assert a simplistic claim that all Chinese were wealthy, a common allegation made against Chinese living elsewhere.

Where class gaps do exist between Chinese and non-Chinese islanders, these are not always a source of community division. A number of wealthier informants, including Sutoyo, attributed the lack of tension to the solid foundation established between Chinese and Malays on the basis of their employment relationships – the Chinese as business owners and the Malays as employees. Ah An argued:

> In Jakarta, there are lots of [non-Chinese] newcomers, but here the population is well established. If they wanted to start a mass movement against the Chinese, they'd think long and hard. Pretty much all of them have a Chinese boss.

Elsewhere in 1ndonesia, ethnically specific employment relationships have been a great source of tension between Chinese business owners and non-Chinese employees, in part because of perceptions that Chinese employers engage in discriminatory hiring and promotion practices. Although this is true to some extent in Karimun, the small size of Chinese-owned businesses, the dearth of alternative employment opportunities and the cultural familiarity between Chinese and non-Chinese go a long way in mediating such perceptions. Ah Chai, a 54-year-old from Tanjung Balai Karimun, also attributed peaceful inter-ethnic relations to the employment relationships that existed between Malays and Chinese:

> Well, one thing is that there is a relationship between workers and their bosses. As you know, most Chinese people hire Chinese. But here lots of workers in Chinese companies are not Chinese. They need each other. They have an employment relationship. So the entrepreneur needs labor, and some of those who work for him are Chinese and some aren't. They need each other. This creates a relationship. Besides that, school kids mix. There aren't schools especially for Chinese or Indonesians, they're all mixed. So from when they are small they're already learning to mix with each other. And also the sports fields. There aren't sports fields just for Chinese or for Indonesians. No. They all play sport together happily. And on the field they talk to each other and exchange opinions. Also, for example, the Chinese Association. If we do social work, we don't just help Chinese – we help anyone in need for free. For example if we offer to help with birth certificates, we help everyone. We don't differentiate.

A second significant factor is the length of time that the Chinese have been present in the islands. Our non-Chinese respondents openly acknowledged that the Chinese had been in Karimun for a "long time" as evidenced by their temples, villages and cemeteries.[11] As Long (2009: 135) notes in his study of Tanjung Pinang. Chinese traders are rarely painted as villains. Instead, his informants noted, '"the Chinese had always traded in Tanjung Pinang." The villains were in fact the more recently arrived Minangkabau, who dominated the first wave of migration in the 1950s. Indeed, it is commonplace for Malays, Chinese and other long-term residents to assert their legitimacy as “old timers” in the face of more recent arrivals. It is these recent arrivals – rather than the Chinese – who are often the subject of criticism for their inability to integrate, and their lack of understanding of the Riau Islands "'way of life."

Citizenship and belonging

A key part of the discourse of the "Chinese Problem" is the commonly held view that Chinese Indonesians are transients (*penumpang*) who are not committed to Indonesia (Hoon 2008: 137-42; 60- 62). As Ah An observed:

> Whenever something goes wrong, the Chinese cop it first. If houses get burnt, it's the houses of the Chinese that go first. If someone wants to bash people up, it's the Chinese who get bashed up first. They think we are just *numpang* (staying here without contributing) even though we are *asli* [indigenous, of this place] – we’re Indonesian citizens. There's no way I'm going back to the PRC. But the

> Indonesians don't see it that way. To them, Chinese are not Indonesians. But we think we're pure Indonesians. 100 percent *asli*. We live and die in Indonesia. We're buried here, not in China. But they think otherwise.

As Ah An's comments suggest, the sense that Chinese are not truly *of* Indonesia is certainly present in Karimun. Yet Chinese from elsewhere understand the qualitative difference in the expression or that sentiment. For example, Erni contrasted her experience in the islands to life in Jakarta as follows:

> ln Jakarta we get called *amoi*… or "Hey slanty-eyes… look, a Chinese'" like that. But here it's as if we are welcome. The Chinese here feel that although there are some differences with the other ethnic groups this is their home... they feel patriotic... that's why the Chinese here can speak such good Malay. They can build lives here without that ever-pervasive fear that one day they might have to leave... it's not like that. They know that they were born here and that the people here have never tried to hurt them. I've experienced Jakarta and Karimun, so I know how it feels.

To understand what it means to be both "Chinese" and "Indonesian" in Karimun, it is thus important to consider the historical importance of citizenship status. At the time of independence, most Chinese in the islands were classified as being foreign. Article 26 of the 1945 Constitution distinguishes between "native-born [*asli*] Indonesians" and persons of other nationality who are legalized by statute as being citizens. The 1946 Citizenship Act and the 1949 Round Table Agreement were based on *jus soli* principle and the so-called "passive system'": *peranakan* Chinese who had been Dutch subjects and who did not reject Indonesian citizenship were regarded as dual nationals of China and Indonesia. In 1958 a new Citizenship Act was introduced based on an "active system" by which Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent would lose their status as citizens if they failed to make an official declaration to reject Chinese citizenship. The Act created two main categories of Chinese: the *Warga Negara Indonesia* (or Indonesian citizens, WNI) and the *Warga Negara Asing* (or foreign citizens, WNA). Foreign Chinese could only become Indonesian citizens through naturalization, a costly and complex process.

As numerous scholars have observed, the term "Indonesian citizen" (WNI) was, however, generally understood to mean a person of foreign (Chinese) origin and therefore not indigenous (*asli*). According to Cappel (2009: 241):

> The logical consequence of this constitutional dichotomy is that the native-born are *ipso facto* Indonesian citizens, whereas persons of other nationality need to take further steps to qualify for Indonesian citizenship, steps which themselves depend on the terms of citizenship legislation passed by the Indonesian parliament.

In other words, the "practical operation of the citizenship regime is quite different from its formal appearance" (Lindsey 2005: 48). Under the New Order, citizens were officially categorized into two groups: *pribumi* (native) and non-*pribumi* (commonly understood as ethnic Chinese). It has been widely documented that provisions related to obtaining an

Indonesian Citizenship Certificate (Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia, SBKRI) were generally understood as applying only to citizens of Chinese descent and these in turn have become associated with deep-seated and ongoing discrimination against Chinese.[12] For example, Budi, who owns a motorcycle repair shop outside Tanjung Balai Karimun, complained that Chinese had been required to show their SBKRI whenever they wanted to organize a birth certificate, an identity card or a passport.

It was not until 1 August 2006, when the new Citizenship Law (Law No.l2/2006) came into effect, that this discriminatory structure was revoked. Section 2 of the new law repealed the wording of Article 26 of the Constitution and clarified the meaning of "native-born [*asli*] Indonesians" as "those who became Indonesian citizens at the time of their birth and have not voluntarily accepted any other citizenship" (Cappel 2009: 241). For the Chinese living in Karimun, changes to the citizenship law in 2006 provided a strong affirmation of their natural home in the islands.[13] As Sutoyo commented, "we are much happier because of the law. The law used to restrict the rights of our ethnic group... we used to be second-class citizens but now we are the same. We feel the difference."

Effendi, Chair of the Chinese Association (Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia) in Tanjung Balai Karimun at the time of the introduction of the new Citizenship Law, felt that it was a major step toward formal recognition of the Chinese community as legitimate members of the Indonesian community. His successor, Budi, explained that the biggest change he had witnessed since the introduction of the new law was the removal of administrative discrimination by lower levels of the bureaucracy. This was because the changes to the Citizenship Law provided the Chinese with a clear legal foundation from which to challenge government officials who insisted that they provide SBKRI. For example, when Effendi – a solicitor – heard that immigration officials continued to ask for SBKRI even after the 2006 Citizenship Law was introduced, he met with the Head of Immigration, who acted immediately on the information. As a result, Chinese are no longer asked for SBKRI when they apply for passports. Effendi described this response as a sign of the strong bonds that exist between locally born officials and Chinese in the islands, noting that Malay officials in local government were much more sympathetic than central authorities because they grew up with and went to school with Chinese.

Responses to 1998

The positive accounts that our respondents gave of their life in Karimun paint a somewhat utopic vision of inter-ethnic relations, as do stories of local state officials who chose not to enforce national laws prohibiting public expressions of Chinese culture. These accounts clearly overlook the extent to which the Chinese are subject to everyday discrimination in their dealings with local bureaucracies. In the Islands, as elsewhere, the requirement to pay "fees" or apply for "permits" for routine matters are examples of ways in which the Chinese are treated differently from other islanders. Casual anti-Chinese sentiment is also an everyday occurrence throughout the islands. Non-Chinese sometimes accuse the Chinese of setting themselves apart from other islanders through their perceived superior wealth, their religion, their consumption of pork (which can effectively segregate coffee shops and restaurants), the

existence of relatively demographically homogenous "Chinatown" areas and their use of Chinese language in public. However, these views coexist alongside statements that not all Chinese are wealthy, that islander-born Chinese are more integrated into the local community and respectful of Islam and Malay *adat*, and that in contrast to the Chinese, it is the new migrants from other parts of Indonesia who are less integrated into Riau-Islander lifestyles.

It is perhaps not surprising, given this balance, that the ethnic tension that has characterized some other parts of Indonesia is far less pronounced in the islands – a fact evident in local responses to the anti-Chinese violence immediately after Suharto's resignation in May 1998. The Karimun Chinese became increasingly concerned for a time about the possibility of racially motivated violence sparked by perceptions that they did not belong. However, in large part, this sense of unease emerged from the general history of violence against the Chinese in Indonesia rather than from personal experience.

The islanders' concern was exacerbated by the mass exodus from Jakarta that accompanied the violence of 1998. It has been widely reported that in the aftermath of the riots in Jakarta, large numbers of Chinese from Java and other parts of Indonesia fled to the islands, particularly Batam, from where they intended to take refuge in Singapore. Hiteong, a 42-year-old restaurateur who lives in Karimun but owns a large restaurant in Batam, observed that many of the Chinese who flew to Batam in the wake of the 1998 riots sold their cars at low prices at Sukarno-Hatta airport before leaving, and on their arrival in Batam, bought ferry tickets to Singapore. Others stayed in the Islands on "stand-by," ready to leave if the violence spread. Some local Chinese also sent family, primarily women and children, to the safety of Singapore as a precautionary measure. As Sutoyo recalled:

> People were worried here. That was about as much of an issue we had... there were no riots here. There were issues outside Karimun. In Batam a riot was going to break out... but it didn't happen in Karimun... we were just worried.

As Sutoyo's comments suggest, the anti-Chinese violence that characterized the end of the Suharto regime was never replicated in the Riau Islands. In fact, in many cases, the events of that year revealed that the opposite was true. According to the guardian of the Banyan Tree Temple in Senggarang on Bintan, for example, Malays stood beside their Chinese neighbors in nightly vigils in the uncertain months of 1998. Recalling this period almost a decade later, our informants inevitably compared their lives in Karimun with those of the Chinese in Jakarta and elsewhere in Java, claiming that the Chinese living elsewhere had faced overt discrimination and violence because they were not integrated into their local communities.

I wouldn't want to live there

The exodus of wealthy Chinese in 1998 is widely viewed in Indonesia as confirmation of the strength of ethnic ties (Singapore is viewed as a Chinese country) over nationalism, and as a triumph of self-interest over loyalty. However, the accounts of our respondents challenge these assumptions about the sentiments of Chinese Indonesians. The majority of our interviewees expressed a strong sense of Indonesian nationalism and emphasized the

differences between themselves and their Singaporean and/or Malaysian counterparts, whom they described in national rather than ethnic terms.

Compared to most other parts of Indonesia, where daily engagements with Chinese from other parts of the region are not commonplace, Chinese in the Riau Islands have a much stronger sense of their particular place in the Chinese diaspora. For Ah Chai, the difference is intimately linked with Chinese involvement in the struggle for Independence. To leave the Indonesian nation would be to forget the struggles of his ancestors and their contemporaries who had fought for their place as Indonesian citizens:

> We need to remember our history. The struggle of our ancestors, who shed blood – so much blood – for this country... The land of *tumpah darah* [bloodshed) is different from human land. If it's *tanah tumpah darah* it can't be negotiated.

However, the majority of our respondents couched their responses not in terms of a love of the nation (although some expressed that sentiment), but in terms of acculturation to a superior way of life. When talking about the benefits of Indonesian citizenship, they typically highlighted the quality of life they experienced over and above the advantages of living in economically prosperous Singapore. Our Karimun informants exhibited a deep knowledge about life in Singapore, including the positive and negative dimensions of an authoritarian state that delivers economic benefits and the rule of law. Despite the obvious financial incentives of living in a developed country, everyone we spoke to expressed a strong distaste for the regulations that govern everyday life in Singapore. As Erni said:

> I've also heard that just being a citizen of Singapore isn't that nice. I mean in terms of discipline… I couldn't live the way that I do here... It'd be stressful. There'd be too many adaptations that would have to be made... I would be trapped. I'm scared that I wouldn't be able to do it because the law is so well enforced... You need to be trained from when we are small.

These difficulties that life in Singapore posed were felt keenly by Riau Islander Chinese, particularly working-class Chinese, who recognized their potentially marginal status in Singapore's technologically advanced economy. Ah An argued that while manual laborers struggled to make a living in Singapore, in Indonesia everyone eats well:

> Singapore just has the good name. If you ask taxi drivers about their situation they are really angry. Being Singaporean means nothing if every day they face huge risks. If they don't work they don't eat. In Indonesia you eat even if you don't have work.

According to Hui Hui, a 23-year-old shop attendant who was born in Karimun:

> On the positive side, it'd be safe, and the government would be good. But on the negative side, it's hard to make a living. You have to work for 12 hours a day. Sure, the wages are high, but it's exhausting. Here it's relaxed. Everything is easy. The problem here is that experiences are really limited and the government is crap.

Ahong, a 26-year-old with primary school education, who sells fried snacks by the side of a road, was also worried about the economic hardship he would face:

> No way. Life is hard there, and business is not good. I would choose not to go with Singapore. I'm better off in Indonesia.

More striking, however, was the fact that those who were comparatively well off had little interest in living in Singapore. Aleng, who owns a mechanical and electrical spare-parts shop and frequently travels to Singapore, argued that he could afford a better quality of life in Karimun because it was cheaper and because his low level of formal education was irrelevant. He worried that if he became Singaporean he would have to live a much less comfortable lifestyle – a sentiment echoed by many other wealthy informants.

Wealthy Chinese like Aleng and Sutoyo could have moved to Singapore during the New Order period, or even since. Instead, they have made a conscious choice to remain in Indonesia. While they are aware that their ethnicity accords them particular advantages when dealing with Singaporeans, they are also very aware that if they moved to Singapore they could not compete. Perhaps even more significantly, many well-established Chinese scoff at the lifestyles of their Singaporean relatives, not only eschewing the "rat race" of the global city-state in favor of the more leisurely pace of life in the islands but also affirming their commitment to the Indonesian nation.

Conclusion

In the post-1998 period, renewed emphasis has been placed on the question of Chinese loyalties to the Indonesian nation. Purdey (2003) argues that in the aftermath of anti-Chinese violence, a contested debate cast in terms of the politics of *asimilasi* (assimilation) and *integrasi* (integration) has resurfaced, drawing upon similar debates in the late 1950s and 1960s. She notes that while the character of the debate has changed because now almost all ethnic Chinese are Indonesian citizens (and share the experience of common suffering under the New Order and post-New Order regimes), alternatives *to asimilasi–integrasi* have been slow to emerge (Purdey 2003: 422 23).

In the Islands, the position of the Chinese has historically been very much one of integration rather than assimilation. Like Chinese in other parts of Indonesia, those living in Karimun have faced discrimination and the threat of violence for many generations. In many respects, however, life in the Riau islands is very different from life in other parts of Indonesia. The Chinese in Karimun form a significant minority which has established a strong sense of community built on the public expression of Chinese culture and languages. For the Karimun Chinese, integration (as opposed to assimilation) is a measure of the breadth and depth of their relationships with non-Chinese islanders as employers, friends and members of the broader community, demonstrated through the ability to participate in community events and religious festivals.

However, as our account attests, such integration has been accompanied by acculturation to a particular "islander" way of life. The Riau Islands are commonly viewed as a space set apart

from the rules and regulations that govern other parts of Indonesia, particularly Java.[14] For Chinese of all social strata, there are enormous benefits to living in the Islands. The pace of life, the cost of living and the easy access to quality education and health care in nearby Singapore and Malaysia ensure that most Chinese feel a strong sense a place and belonging, and so the prospect of leaving Indonesia is therefore not particularly appealing. To be Chinese in Indonesia may have its drawbacks, but it is more preferable to being a Singaporean citizen.

For the Chinese living in Karimun, then, the sense of being Chinese Indonesians is intimately linked to a strong sense of place. As Riau Islanders, they claim to share a way of life and an outlook that is distinct from those of Indonesians living elsewhere. This way of life is closely tied to a strong sense of identity and belonging expressed in the view that "it's different here". That difference is measured by the strength of interpersonal ties between Chinese and Malays, long-term public acceptance of expressions of Chinese culture and language and the lack of ethnic violence targeting the Chinese. It is articulated through a constant process of comparison: *asli* versus foreign-born; Jakarta/Java versus Karimun/the Riau Islands; islanders versus newcomers; and Indonesians versus Singaporeans/Malaysians. These binaries structure everyday accounts of identity and belonging and produce a distinctly localized sense of being both Chinese and Indonesian.

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Notes

[1] Less than 30 percent were born in the islands. This was markedly different from other parts of the archipelago: in 1930s Java, 79% of the Chinese were locally born and in the Outer Provinces as a whole the figure was 48% (Ng 1976: 21-22). Van der Putten (2001: 178) notes that Tanjung Pinang was established as a Chinese town, something that worried the Dutch Resident, who in 1863 expressed his concern that the predominance of the Chinese was preventing the few Malays that lived in the town from establishing a foothold.

[2] The research on which this chapter is based was funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project grant "In the Shadow of Singapore: The Limits of Transnationalism in Insular Riau" (DP0557368). The bulk of the fieldwork was conducted in Karimun by Michele Ford in 2006 and 2008. We would like to thank Wayne Palmer, who conducted follow-up interviews on our behalf in 2010.

[3] Although the Riau Islands have been home to a large Chinese population for over two centuries, there has been little scholarly research on the diverse Chinese communities who call the islands home. While some studies of the region make reference to early forms of social organization among merchants, plantation owners and coolies, and the relationship between Chinese settlers and the indigenous polity (Trocki 1979: Andaya and

Andaya 1982: Somers Heidhues 1992, 1996), there are no detailed ethnographic or historical accounts of the diverse Chinese communities who have lived there. One of the few sociological studies of this community is a Nanyang University research paper by Ng Chin-keong (1976), who conducted research in the town of Tanjung Pinang on Bintan Island in the early 1970s. Ng's study does not describe the Chinese community in Karimun, but it provides an important backdrop against which to understand the position of the Chinese in the islands as a whole.

[4] As tin and gambier production declined in the 1930s, the loss of employment was partially redressed by bauxite mining in Bintan, with significant numbers of Hakka Chinese arriving in the islands when mining first began in 1935 (Ng 1976: 38).

[5] There are estimates that between 1 January 1946 and 31 July 1947, $290 million worth of goods were smuggled from republican-controlled areas to Malaya/Singapore. Of this, native rubber accounted for $202.3 million or 70 percent, while estate produce accounted for only $87.7 million (Twang 1998: 200).

[6] Ng (1976: 52) argues, however, that for many of these traders, economic uncertainty rather than government regulations affected their businesses, with many closing down in the early years of Independence.

[7] Much of this in-migration has been a spontaneous response to the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle. It is also important to note that statistics on ethnic composition are influenced by the fact that many islanders of mixed ancestry prefer to claim Malay ethnicity.

[8] The 2000 census shows that 76 percent or the population of the province lives in urban areas.

[9] Sobary (1987: 9) estimates that by 1985 there was one television set per family in Tanjung Pinang.

[10] In his study of 1970s Tanjung Pinang, Ng found that while older people preferred Mandarin serials, younger people liked to watch Western shows with Malay subtitles (Ng 1976: 73).

[11] Our work resonates with Long's (2009) work in Tanjung Pinang, which reveals the commonplace appearance of "Chinese ghosts" in Malay accounts of individuals who have been afflicted by supernatural phenomena. The appearance of Chinese ghosts is said to be linked to the presence of old, over-grown Chinese cemeteries.

[12] For a discussion of this and related issues, see Ford and Purdey (2009).

[13] In the 1930s, the Chinese population of the Riau Islands had been mostly migrants, but by the 1970s the majority were Indonesian citizens.

[14] This unique way of life is typically invoked by Riau Islanders to explain the harmonious nature of inter-ethnic relations between the Chinese and Malays, as well as local attitudes toward a range or "illegal but licit" practices such as smuggling and "illegal" migration (Ford and Lyons 2012).