

Reference in APA 7 Style:

Heryanto, A. (2024). Racial discrimination as paradox: the case of Chinese Indonesians. In N. Sumi & T. Wulia (Eds.), *Tintin Wulia: Things-in-Common* (pp. 89–91). Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art.

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Racial discrimination as paradox: the case of Chinese Indonesians

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Indonesians often take pride in belonging to one of the world's most diverse nations, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically. Dutch colonialism brought their separate ancestors together under one state administration for many years until Japan took the territory under its rule (1942–1945). As soon as World War II concluded, local nationalists declared independence in August 1945. Since independence, however, differences in skin colour or religion have repeatedly threatened the nation's unity. Violent inter-religious or inter-ethnic conflicts flared up from time to time. This essay focusses specifically on the remarkable discrimination that has been targeted at Indonesians of Chinese descent, who constitute approximately 1.2 per cent of the population. I will highlight the paradoxes of such discrimination, and discuss its broader historical context and the general situation at present.

Chinese Indonesians are not the only minority group to suffer from significant discrimination. However, for a combination of reasons, the status of Chinese ethnicity is historically specific, making the discrimination against this group distinct and intriguing. Except for their compatriots of Indian descent, no other minority group has occupied the same economically privileged position as that which is enjoyed by a small percentage of wealthy Chinese Indonesians. However, state official insinuations and public imagination about this ethnic group's wealth are often riddled with overstatement and stereotyping.

Of special interest to visitors to the exhibition *Tintin Wulia: Things-in-Common*, many Chinese Indonesians have leading roles in the history of visual, literary, and performing arts since the early twentieth century, well before Indonesia's independence, along with those designated as being of European descent. Today a number of Chinese and Indian Indonesians occupy salient positions in the contemporary art scene and entertainment industry. However, until very recently, the historic role of these various ethnic minority groups has been almost entirely erased or put under erasure in the strongly nationalist narratives and public memory.

More than any other ethnic minority group, Chinese Indonesians have been the easiest and most frequent target of mass violence. The May 1998 incident was but one of the worst cases in many decades. It is the most recent and most documented case of large-scale anti-Chinese violence. Curiously, it also marks the beginning of a significant change in a long history of such violence.

MAY 1998

The full story of what happened in May 1998 and the precise scope of the destruction may never see the light of the day. One of the earliest formal and authoritative reports of the incident came from Volunteers Team for Humanity, a loosely organised group under the leadership of three highly respected human rights activists: Father Sandyawan Sumardi, Ita Fatia Nadia and Karlina Supeli-Leksono. They contended that between 13 May and 13 July 1998, as many as 168 females between the ages of 10 and 50 were gang raped. Nearly all of the victims were ethnic Chinese. Some attacks took place as a spectacle to be watched either coercively by the victims' families, accidentally by passersby, or consensually by a cheering crowd. Some 138 of those rapes took place in the greater Jakarta area, and most of them (132 cases) occurred on the two days of 13 and 14 May 1998. During these two days, 1,200 people were killed, mostly burned in buildings, but 27 from gunfire. The total death toll in various cities as of 9 June 1998 amounted to 2,244. More than 4,000 shops and shopping malls were burned down, while several thousand vehicles and houses being set afire.

All this unfolded without the culprits having to confront the state security forces, then under the military dictatorship of the New Order. No serious legal investigation, let alone charges, has been attempted. While no hard evidence is yet available to prove that specific individuals or institutions within the military committed these hideous crimes, we have strong reasons to doubt that the masses could have the capacity and resources required to do so. No racial or ethnic groups in Indonesia, no matter how agitated, could inflict systematic violence with abundant high-powered ammunition simultaneously in 27 areas in a capital city of 10 million inhabitants in less than 50 hours. For these reasons, the wide use of the 'mass riots' to refer to the incident is highly questionable. From early on, I described it as a case of racialised (as distinct from racist) 'state terrorism.'

There were reports of individual rapes in Jakarta and several other cities weeks after the dust settled in ruined Jakarta. They appear to be spillover or residual cases. In the months that followed, the Volunteers Team for Humanity were accused of blowing up or purely fabricating

the issue of rape. For instance, non-governmental groups such as the Indonesian Committee for Global Islam Solidarity (Komite Indonesia untuk Solidaritas Dunia Islam or KISDI) and the Coordinating Body for Islam Missionaries throughout Indonesia (Badan Koordinasi Mubalig se-Indonesia) condemned the Volunteers' report. They suspected it was an attempt to discredit Islam. Individual members of the Volunteers experienced repeated harassment and threats. One of them (who might be a rape victim herself) was tortured to death in her home only days before she was due to depart to the US in order to testify about the May 1998 violence.

By no means was the May 1998 unique. For most of the twentieth century, anti-Chinese mass violence had been regular and regulated (state-sanctioned). Anti-Chinese discriminatory policies were extensive and vigorous during the New Order rule (1966–1998). However, those policies and their enforcements were full of inconsistencies and paradoxes, as will be elaborated in a moment. While the scale of the May 1998 violence is overwhelming, the incident also prompted an unprecedented backlash. For the first time, a large number of ethnically non-Chinese people and groups publicly condemned the racialized violence. A wide range of non-state individuals, groups and institutions organized events and support activities for the victims of the May 1998 incidents. To understand the conditions of possibility for the May 1998 violence to take place, as well as the backlash, we must examine the rise of the New Order regime in 1966, its resilience during the 1980s, and the crises that led to its downfall soon after the May 1998 violence.

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RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AS PARADOX

Before we examine the emergence of the New Order, let us take a few steps back. In 1945, Indonesia declared its independence. It did so swiftly, during a political vacuum that emerged after Japan, the occupying force, lost the War and before the Allied Forces were prepared to reinstate the Dutch Colony (The Netherlands East Indies). It took four bloody years of revolution before a formal transfer of power from the Netherlands to Indonesia (1949) took place. Unfortunately, freedom and sovereignty alone did not guarantee an easy nation-building project. In the first two decades of independence, Indonesia continually faced political instability, internal rebellions, and hostility from the Western Bloc during the Cold War. The latter perceived President Sukarno to be leaning too far towards the People's Republic of China (PRC), despite his earlier attempts to build a neutral association of the Third World nations (e.g. the famous Bandung Summit, 1955).

The instability eased with the establishment of a military dictatorship under the leadership of Major General Suharto. With the generous support of the Western Bloc in the Cold War, Suharto took over the state power from his commander-in-chief, then President Sukarno. For the next three decades, Suharto became the sole head of state for the entire life of the militarist rule of the New Order. For the first time since independence, a semblance of political stability set in, and substantial economic growth proceeded for the next three decades. However, the cost of this stability is staggering. The New Order was founded on top of one of the worst massacres in modern history (1965–1966).

Throughout its rule, the New Order regime conducted a series of nationwide anti-communist, anti-left, and anti-Sukarno campaigns. The anti-communist overkill was so successful that it became a handy tool for the New Order and its successors to silence, intimidate, and discredit dissidents and political rivals alike by accusing them of having associations with communists. Until recently, even rival members of the top political elite within these anti-communist governments were not exempted from being target of hoaxes and being accused of associating with the bygone Party.

The Indonesian Communist Party was banned in March 1966 after hundreds of thousands of its members and suspected supporters were killed in late 1965 and early 1966. Chinese Indonesians were also targeted, as they were perceived to be loyal to the PRC, or deeply attached or essentially susceptible to communism. This ethnic group was declared to be essentially non-Indonesian or less Indonesian. Officially dubbed as 'non-indigenous', they were expected to become more Indonesian through the state-sponsored program of 'assimilation', by eradicating their 'Chineseness'. They were coerced to change their personal names, and adopt more 'Indonesian-sounding' alternatives. Mandarin and all other Chinese languages were banned, and so were all Chinese traditional festivals, sports and celebrations, including Chinese songs and moon cakes for the Lunar Year. Access to public services, including education, was also subject to limitation. Tintin Wulia was born and raised in a Chinese Indonesian family during this period.

The assimilation program was full of contradictions. Chinese men were highly praised for intermarriage, but such intermarriage did not turn a Chinese groom into an equal fellow citizen. Chinese men marrying native women still had to carry special identification cards and were subject to extra administrative requirements and extortion. Their children were still classed as 'non-indigenous', regardless of how 'purely native' their mothers were. The pariah status continued indefinitely along the male line, as did the stigma of being 'communist'.

Adopting non-Chinese-sounding names did not allow the ethnic population to disappear into the native crowd in state documents and files. Access to public service still required those categorized as Chinese descendants to declare their original names so that their background could be recorded and their stigma retained. With one or two exceptions, badminton world champions of Chinese descent were known by their Indonesian names. But criminals of the same ethnic background often appeared in media reports under their Chinese names.

Despite those wide-ranging, racist state policies and practices, the wealth of top Chinese Indonesian businesspeople rose dramatically during the same period. Thus, the paradox. Instead of being driven by genuine racist hatred, the New Order launched and utilised an anti-Chinese campaign for pragmatic reasons. In attempts to defer or undercut the emergence of a domestic bourgeoisie, the New Order preferred to boost the national economy in partnership with Chinese and foreign businessmen alike, at the expense of their capable counterparts from so-called 'indigenous' ethnic backgrounds. Top business people with Chinese and foreign backgrounds enjoyed the state's favouritism, as these two minorities had no prospect of forming an independent force in the nation's political dynamics. The combination of their economic dominance and political/cultural deprivation are not mutually contradictory. They are two integral components of one strategy.

This strategy required periodic anti-Chinese violence. These incidents were regularly reported, narrated, analysed, and remembered as a spontaneous act of angry masses demanding justice. The violence served the interests of the regime in multiple ways. It reproduced and deepened Chinese dependence on state officials for protection through extra fees. The violence discredited opposition figures, who were accused of having masterminded the 'riots'. It also deflected the popular outrage away from both the state and the security apparatus, which played hero. Occasionally, the Chinese minority was even blamed for the occurrence of anti-Chinese violence on the pretext that they had dominated the national economy and displayed luxurious lifestyles that caused 'social jealousy'.

Despite appearing to be anti-Chinese, the New Order never wanted to wipe out Chinese identities. On the contrary, their identities were continually reproduced, if only under erasure or in stereotypes. The negation was a necessary ingredient in the making of this ethnic group as the nation's Other. The New Order regime could not possibly want the assimilation program that it sponsored to succeed. To dissolve Chinese identities in an effective 'assimilation' program would mean an end to the division of labour by race, upon which the status quo depended.

No regime lasts forever. From the mid-1980s, the New Order elite began to split. Their division worsened in the early 1990s and became increasingly visible to the public. Chances for reconciliation were slimmer with the arrival of the 1997 economic crisis across the region. Large anti-government rallies intensified across the archipelago in 1997 and 1998, some with fatalities amongst new martyrs. Then, the May 1998 violence erupted that shook the entire nation. Apparently, the racialised violence was an attempt by certain segments within the ruling elite to deploy an old and now outdated instrument to create a state of emergency, enabling them to grab further extrajudicial power. As it transpired, the violence brought no gains to anyone.

What about the backlash of May 1998 that altered the long history of the anti-Chinese campaign? What is the situation like these days in Indonesia for people of Chinese descent? Has anti-Chinese sentiment gone, or has it continued unabated? I wish to conclude this essay with some answers to these important questions.

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RETURN OF THE DRAGON

The New Order government might take credit for a high level of economic growth for most of its three-decade-long rule. Ironically, this success gradually but also profoundly undermined the New Order's power. Under the military dictatorship, Indonesia underwent significant social, economic, and political changes. One such change was the rise of the so-called urban middle classes, which is the most relevant to our current discussion, and it can only be outlined in the briefest fashion here.

Massive investment from the West, export revenues from the oil bonanza of the 1980s, and the elimination of any opposition facilitated the rapid and steady growth of the nation's economy for a while. Indonesia became one of several Asian countries that made headlines under the rubric of the 'rise of Asia' or the so-called 'Asian century'. Amidst these developments, particularly in the mid-1980s, the nation's professionals and intelligentsia were preoccupied with a self-reflective discussion on the emergence of the so-called 'middle class'.

The first and foremost benefactors of the economic windfall during the New Order were obviously military officers, their families and close allies. Their prosperity spilled over or had some trickle-down effects on the urban population. Over time, the rise of Indonesia's new rich brought about major shifts in social relations in two separate directions.

First, the growing number of the new rich among the sons and daughters of high-ranking officers, technocrats, and high-ranking civil servants reached a critical mass, and not at the expense of the old rich, such as wealthy Chinese Indonesians. Together these new and old rich of diverse ethnic backgrounds went to school, went on vacation, and went shopping, globally. They engaged intimately with each other in business, golf courses, or karaoke rooms. Gradually but consistently, the old racial prejudices and barriers melted. Unlike previous generations, big businessmen and 'native' elites saw themselves as equal, if not superior, to their 'non-native' and expatriate associates. Cross-racial middle-class solidarity began to gain momentum.

Second, at the peak of the state elite, a new animosity grew over sharing a slice of the nation's expanding wealth and the state's power. The bitter division between Suharto's family members and his immediate circles on the one hand and the military on the other became irreconcilable. While this intra-political elite exacerbated the crisis and lent an extra push to the downfall of Suharto and his New Order government, the newly built cross-racial middle-class solidarity explains the backlash of May 1998, and the improved status of the Chinese descent in subsequent decades.

In the 1990s, when Suharto could no longer rely on support from the military, he courted Islamic political forces. His maneuver did not save him from a disgraced exit. Still, the new alliance unleashed an unprecedented and unstoppable burst of energy from the Muslim communities in various forms and directions. From the early 2000s, Islamic qualities became a potent source of authority and political correctness. Contested notions of Islam and Islamness became the central battleground for political rivals to gain legitimacy and make populist appeals, further reducing the relevance of racial issues.

Already in the early 1990s, there was a noticeable decline in public hostility towards the Chinese and an easing of restrictions against their activities. The significant accomplishments of Indonesian Chinese individuals as fellow citizens in various areas other than business and trade enjoyed public recognition. Most significantly, from the early 1990s, there was a new wave of reassertion of Chinese ethnicity in public culture, as Chinese Indonesian reclaimed the right to celebrate their cultural heritage. Against the backdrop of these recent developments, the May

1998 violence appeared both anachronistic and shocking to many. It troubled the conscience of the younger generation of the 'native' middle class. Many felt ashamed and expressed outrage.

This does not mean that racism has totally disappeared. As elsewhere, it has been and will continue to be a part of private and day-to-day social life. The fundamental change since 1998 is that racism is no longer formally incorporated in a wide range of state or other non-state policies and enforced zealously, as before 1998. As a legacy of the New Order, an essentialist conception of ethnicity lingers on. Since the New Order regime has been portrayed as being responsible for denying and suppressing ethnic Chinese culture and identity, there is a strong tendency among many intellectuals and art workers of diverse ethnic backgrounds to restore, rediscover, or revive aspects of Chinese history and legacies that they perceived to have been lost, denied or destroyed in the past. The essentialist conception of ethnicity itself is left unchallenged. Ethnicity is taken for granted as a 'thing'. Only a few embark on more adventurous explorations of how or why ethnicities have been constructed as 'common things' and 'things in common'.