

# Southeast Asian Identities

Culture and the Politics  
of Representation in,  
Indonesia, Malaysia,  
Singapore, and Thailand

edited by

Joel S. Kahn

*chapter four*

## **ETHNIC IDENTITIES AND ERASURE**

### **Chinese Indonesians in Public Culture**

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Ethnicity and nationality have been irrevocably problematized in the contemporary social sciences and in the relatively new area of cultural studies. As Joel S. Kahn indicates in his introduction to this volume, a variety of “constructionist” perspectives articulate the problems of these modern subject identities. While adopting some of these “constructionist” insights, I will retain some degree of empiricism in discussing the changing political significance of Chinese ethnicity in Indonesia. Obviously, a constructionist theorist could offer somewhat different insights than those presented here. My limited purpose is to show that ethnicity is already overtly problematic (fragmented, ambiguous, unstable) in the practical experience of post-colonial subjects, to whom the elegantly intellectual problematizing of ethnicity as a concept is unheard of. Even among Indonesia’s academic élite, ethnicity is widely accepted (that is “constructed”) as existentially “given” and conceptually unproblematic. Yet, something beyond theorists’ constructs and constructionists’ theories asserts itself in the everyday life of ordinary people.

### **Class Analysis of Ethnicity**

For the first time since the New Order regime assumed power in 1966, the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia have in the 1990s enjoyed a steady increase in respect and legitimacy in public culture. This has occurred without compromising the economic dominance of some wealthy members of the ethnic Chinese community.

Yoon Hwan Shin is one of the first scholars to have taken a close look at this phenomenon (1990). He observes the decline of anti-Chinese sentiment in terms of a politico-economic perspective, that is, as part of a larger process through which the New Order state has engineered the formation of a new, multiracial, capitalist class and hegemony. Yoon notes that not only has discrimination against the Chinese been toned down in public discourse, but that a considerable decline of economic indigenism together with an active ideological campaign for capitalist ethics have worked in tandem to achieve the new class hegemony.

While Yoon's main arguments are tenable and highly instructive, there is a need to explore the issues further. Being concerned primarily with a new development in Indonesian capitalism in terms of class structure, he takes ethnicity as largely given. Yoon demonstrates very well how the Chinese capitalists can now sit comfortably at the apex of the nation's economy, as they share the dominant position with competent indigenous tycoons. However, he says little about whether similar developments are taking place in non-economic areas.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, one needs to reassess the appropriateness of the use of the term "hegemony" in this context to avoid a crude class reductionism.

A series of recent events offers rich material to rethink many of the issues outlined above. These events include the mass rally of workers in Medan in April 1994, the controversial trials of those accused of the murder of the woman labour activist Marsinah, and the bad bank loans in Jakarta. These incidents are relevant here because they have not triggered violent anti-Chinese riots, as one would have expected if they had taken place a decade or so earlier.

The more recent and eventful riots of 27 July 1996 in Jakarta further confirm this observation. Up to the 1980s it would have been difficult to imagine that street violence on such a scale could

have taken place in the capital city without singling out the Chinese community as primary targets. The main targets of the angry mob were government and military properties. Surprisingly, no commentator has yet recognized this unprecedented point about the event. In any case, I will not include this more recent incident in the analysis, because unlike the other chosen three cases, no ethnic issue was involved in the circumstances and feelings that gave rise to the 27 July public outrage.

To appreciate the novelty of the current situation, I must first outline what preceded it, namely, the construction or, rather, reconstruction of Chinese ethnicity within the dominant discourse during the previous two decades of New Order Indonesia. Of central importance here is the paradox of the Chinese dominance of the economy, and their pariah status in the cultural and political spheres.

Political economy may have offered some insights into our understanding of the logic of this paradox. However, it tells us little of how this paradoxical situation is manifested, narrated and represented in actual texts, images and practices. Political economy is, in any case, theoretically suspect to the extent that it presents an overtly rational and instrumentalist account of neatly interlocking structures. One crucial point generally missing in these accounts of the ethnic Chinese is the forceful narrative of the so-called communist abortive *coup d'état* in 1965–66 in which much emphasis is placed on the alleged complicity of the ethnic Chinese. The official narrative of these events should be regarded as constituting a central component and force in the processes that gave birth to the New Order “Self”.

### **Othering the Ethnic Chinese**

The ethnic Chinese are one of the four major “Others” of the New Order Self, the other three being the “West”, “Communism”, and “Fundamentalist Islam”.<sup>2</sup> Othering the ethnic Chinese takes several forms. Firstly, there is the geographical argument. The ethnic Chinese are perceived to have originated from some discrete geographical site outside the boundaries of the nation. As a result, this ethnic group appears to threaten the universal nationalist project of seeking native roots and authentic origins. Theoretically, the Indonesian ethnic Arabs, Indians, or Europeans occupy similar positions, but they have

created no comparable threats. There must be other reasons for the Chinese being such a problematic Other.

Secondly, there is the cultural explanation. Unlike the Arabs or Indians, the ethnic Chinese have a long history of being segregated from the majority of the population through the overstatement of differences of religion and cultural tradition. Although this differentiation is a gross caricature, it has proven to be highly functional in propagating the familiar view of why the Chinese have been the least integrated ethnic group in Indonesia.

Thirdly, there is the argument about economic determination. Chinese Indonesians constitute the only ethnic minority that has sustained a dominant position in the nation's economy. Political economy may have argued forcefully that this factor is more fundamental than the first two. However, why this is so has not been adequately addressed.

Fourthly, there is the constructionist consideration. In New Order propaganda, the ethnic Chinese are suspected of being deeply attached or essentially susceptible to communism. A fairly large proportion of Chinese were killed in the extensive purge of communists and their alleged sympathizers in 1965–67, and those who survived continued to be subject to discrimination. The actual death toll is far from clear. In absolute terms, the Chinese casualties may be smaller in comparison to other ethnic groups. However, given the small size of this ethnic group's total population, the loss of lives was felt significant among their surviving ethnic fellows.

The attacks against this ethnic minority may have been driven by two prevailing perceptions. First, despite serious cases of racial discrimination among the élite of the Indonesian Communist Party against individual Chinese comrades, there was a general belief that leftist politics had always been supported by a large portion of Chinese Indonesians. Secondly, because the People's Republic of China was communist, there was a general essentializing identification of this ethnicity with communism. Because the Soekarno government established a close tie with the People's Republic of China and the Indonesian Communist Party, the New Order's allegation of China's implication in the so-called "abortive coup" of the latter made some sense to a large section of the population. Soon after the army took

control of the country in 1966, the government enforced a wide range of anti-Chinese measures as part of the wave against communism. These included the banning of all Chinese schools, mass organizations, mass media, use of Chinese characters, personal names and names for firms/shops.

The recent softening of anti-Chinese sentiment cannot be explained solely by referring to changes in the economic structure. Instead, any account must link it to the waning effectiveness of the phantom of communist threat, upon which the nation's previous economic growth and political stability greatly depended. While these two discursive changes — on the Chinese and communists — are closely related, they are nonetheless two separate and distinguishable developments. One is not necessarily subordinate to the other.

What was common to the othering of the Chinese, on the one hand, and communists, on the other, was that in both cases what was involved was the massive physical destruction of the victims. Furthermore, the sinister proportion of this extermination can be gauged more clearly if we consider the way the attacks against the Chinese and communists also took place in a realm beyond any legal, administrative or political logic, so to speak. The stigma of being Chinese and hence ideologically “unclean”, or that of being Chinese and hence having been “involved in the 1965 communist coup” were declared contagious and hereditary. The state-sponsored witch-hunt and terror victimized the primary suspects as well as many others having real or suspected associations by birth, marriage, or organizational links with the accused.

Throughout most of New Order history, the government managed to silence, intimidate and discredit all sorts of dissidents by labelling them communists, or communist sympathizers. The 1996 crackdown on pro-democracy movements, with nation-wide anti-communist propaganda, was only a most recent example. Government officials have not only accused Budiman Sudjatmika, head of Partai Demokrasi Rakyat (PDR, or People's Democratic Party) of reviving communism but, to enhance their credibility, they have also accused his father of having been associated in the past with the Indonesian Communist Party. In the days that followed, the press revealed that Sudjatmika's father had in fact been the opposite,

namely, a long-time anti-communist. Although such reckless and often refractory labelling practices may not always convince the general population, the frequent deployment of overt violence that accompanied them succeeded in generating a general acquiescence for many years.

### **Nationalism: Towards an Authentic Native**

One very familiar practice of Othering the ethnic Chinese takes the form of calling them non-*pribumi*, or “non-native”. The label is a colonial legacy that post-colonial dominant groups decided to impose upon silent Others in order to assert an identity of Self (the so-called *pribumi*, or “native”) in a binary opposition.<sup>3</sup> After years of such disciplining, the Indonesian Chinese, especially the younger generations among them, learned to internalize and reproduce these labels.

In theory, the modern nation is anything but an affinity constituted exclusively or primarily by ethnicities, descent, or geographic ties. In the words of Ben Anderson, “the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and ... one could be ‘invented into’ the imagined community” (1983, p. 133); hence, the universal practice of “naturalization”. Paradoxically, all nations have a universal tendency to construct some sort of authentic origins “in blood”, in something seemingly natural, native, or primordial.<sup>4</sup>

Nation-ness, and hence the distinction between Indonesian and non-Indonesian, are only a step away from the ethnic dichotomy of *pribumi* and non-*pribumi*. Nothing illustrates this better than the New Order’s grandiose national park, the Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, “Beautiful Mini Indonesia Park”.<sup>5</sup> In the park, visitors find a replica of Indonesian archipelagic territory, and twenty-seven pavilions representing the so-called traditional and authentic cultures of the twenty-seven provinces of the nation. Here, however, we find nothing representing the lives of fellow-nationals of Arab, Indian, Chinese, or European ethnicity. Nor is there anything representing the many Javanese young people found in the heart of Yogyakarta, the capital city of Javanese high culture, typically wearing blue jeans, riding Japanese motor-bikes, or queuing for McDonald’s hamburgers.<sup>6</sup>

In other multi-ethnic nations, like the neighbouring countries of Singapore or Malaysia, television occasionally becomes a popular window to display token ethnic harmony. Although the New Order regime invested a great amount of resources in projecting similar images of ethnic diversity and harmony, only the so-called *pribumi* ethnic groups are accounted for. Although the Constitution stipulates the principle of equality before the law, Chinese Indonesians are categorized in official and semi-official state administration as less, or other than, “genuine” Indonesians. Worse still, they are occasionally perceived to contaminate the Indonesian authentic self.

Citizens of Chinese descent must carry identification cards with distinct numbers.<sup>7</sup> Extra paper-work and fees are required of them in any legal dealings with the public service. All schools and colleges impose a certain maximum quota for Chinese Indonesians seeking admission. Professions other than commerce are only minimally open to them, if at all. Visitors entering Indonesia will be informed on the customs declaration form that any printed materials in Chinese characters fall in the same category of illegal items as pornography, arms and narcotics.<sup>8</sup>

Ethnic segregation in New Order Indonesia results in the “ghettoization of citizen-Chinese”, where in the entire six successive terms of Soeharto’s presidency (five years each), “there has never been a ‘Chinese’ cabinet minister, though such ministers were a regular feature ... [of the preceding regimes] ... Nor will one find any generals or senior civil servants of obvious Chinese ancestry.”<sup>9</sup>

### **The Political Economy of Chinese Ethnicity**

The extent to which the New Order Self is premised on the active and conscious othering of the Chinese indicates how indispensable this ethnic Other is for the reproduction of the native Self. If the Chinese were simply unwanted, this minority could have been marginalized, destroyed, or simply ignored. The fact that the “Chinese problem” persists in an extended period of impressive economic-growth suggests that it may not in fact be a problem at all.

In the New Order, Chinese businessmen appear to have always been economically dominant, relative to the rest of the population.

While since 1965 their political and cultural status has declined dramatically, their economic influence has expanded as never before!<sup>10</sup>

Political economists have correctly noted that the New Order officials prefer to boost the national economy in partnership with Chinese and foreign businessmen alike. They have no prospect in the foreseeable future of forming an independent force in the nation's political dynamics. Their economic dominance and political/cultural deprivation are not mutually contradictory.

In fact, the paradox has reproduced itself over a long period of time. Chinese economic domination reinforces the long-standing antagonism of the native population. Periodic anti-Chinese riots have been reported, narrated, analysed and remembered as something natural and spontaneous, as a populist search for justice. While security officers usually act to restore order, in the final analysis the violence serves the interests of the regime. It reproduces the Chinese dependence on state protection, and defers, if not undercuts, the potential emergence of a domestic bourgeoisie. The violence discredits popular native efforts to express grievances, and deflects anger away from both the state and sensitive foreign investors. The security apparatus can always play the role of hero.

Following periodic anti-Chinese riots, commentators usually blame the victims for having provoked the angry mass by dominating the national economy and displaying luxurious lifestyles.<sup>11</sup> In some areas, Chinese males are summoned by the local police chief or military commander to be told of their alleged guilt in causing the social unrest and material loss.<sup>12</sup>

### **Under Erasure**

Given the importance of ethnic tension in reproducing the New Order's economic growth and political stability, the government's decision to promote the ineffective programme of ethnic assimilation makes sense. The dominant position of the Chinese in the nation's economy has been widely perceived to be a national problem. This has been explained predominantly in psychologically or culturally essentialist terms; hence, the popular myths of the Chinese superior work ethic, industriousness, thrift or perseverance. While not vicious traits when taken on their own, to treat them as cultural/psychological

attributes unique to the Chinese and to assume that together they exhaust the meaning of Chineseness means that the Indonesian Chinese have been literally stuck with a very narrow range of human characteristics, making it difficult to both imagine and image them in any other way. As such, the Chinese have been branded asocial and unpatriotic, and blamed for supposedly pursuing selfish interests and for remaining aloof from much of national life.

In response to this “Chinese problem”, the New Order government endorses a semi-private and military-backed “Program Pembauran”, or “Assimilation Programme”. The basis of the programme is the presumption that Chinese ethnic identities and their essential character are incompatible with the national personality, and have caused problems for national integration and unity. Recurring anti-Chinese riots are presented as evidence to support the argument. The Assimilation Programme prescribes the total dissolution of any marks and identities of Chineseness, and urges this problematic ethnic group to immerse itself in officially constructed local cultures, which are the only legitimate ethnic cultures.

Intermarriage is highly praised, at least in rhetorical terms. Giving up both Chinese personal names and Chinese business names was strongly urged. Converting to Islam, the religion of the native majority, understandably is another sanctioned way of assimilation.

Once the Assimilation Programme was instituted as the official solution to the “Chinese problem”, the *pribumi* and non-*pribumi* dichotomy was reaffirmed as given. Eradicating Chinese characters (in both senses), traditional practices and cultural artifacts is seen as ethically unproblematic. The problems with the Assimilation Programme are largely seen as technical, psychological and requiring time.

However, contradictions in the Assimilation Programmes soon became glaringly evident. While Chinese males are highly praised for intermarriage, such intermarriage does not turn a Chinese groom into an equal fellow-citizen. Chinese males marrying native women still have to carry special identification cards and are subject to various other administrative discriminations. Their children are still classed as non-*pribumi*, regardless of how purely native their mothers are. The pariah status continues indefinitely along the male line, just as

does the stigma of having been “involved in the 1965 communist coup”.

While changing Chinese names is strongly encouraged, access to public service nevertheless requires that the Chinese declare their former, and now stigmatized, names. Adopting non-Chinese-sounding names does not allow the ethnic population to disappear into the native crowd in state documents and files. Changing names is enforced not really to eradicate racial discrimination. Rather, it celebrates the conquest of a threat that the conquerors had initially fashioned. Badminton world champions of Chinese descent are known by their Indonesian names. But criminals of the same ethnic background appear in the mass media under their Chinese names.<sup>13</sup>

Chinese conversion to Islam is often seen as a noble act of assimilation and nationalism. Understandably, there has been a serious attempt to repress any historical evidence suggesting the pioneering work of the ethnic Chinese in spreading Islam in the archipelago. The simple dichotomy between native and non-native must be purged of ambiguity. For similar reasons, until very recently, the rise of indigenous tycoons has been as much under-reported as has the existence of the Chinese poor.

Chinese identities are never totally to be wiped out. They are carefully and continually reproduced, but always under erasure. In fact, the negation is a necessary element of the making of this ethnic Other. The New Order regime cannot possibly want the Assimilation Programme that it co-sponsors to attain its declared aims. Achieving these aims must instead be forever deferred. To dissolve Chinese identities in an effective programme of “assimilation” means to give up the division of labour by race, upon which the status quo depends so much. The recent growth of multiracial social alliances may indeed signal serious changes to the status quo. No regime lasts forever.

### **Early Signs of Change in the 1990s**

Things began to change rapidly in the 1990s. Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng visited Indonesia in 1990, following a series of exchange visits by officials from the two governments. Soon afterwards, the Chinese-Indonesian Institute for Economic, Social and Cultural Co-operation was founded. While the bans on the use of the Chinese

language and Chinese characters have not been repealed, the Indonesian Government is now sponsoring the publication of a Chinese–Indonesian dictionary.<sup>14</sup> In 1996, a prominent linguist wrote a column not only welcoming the “Booming Courses on Speaking Mandarin” in Jakarta, but also at the same time complaining about the pedagogical quality of many of these courses.

Of course, Li Peng and his government have nothing to do with most Chinese Indonesians. The many meetings between the two governments mean little to the general population in both Indonesia and China. However, for reasons which cannot be attributed to the *rapprochement* between these two countries, racial tension has also softened over an extended period and on a scale unprecedented in New Order Indonesia. These changes can be seen at two different levels.

Firstly, more and more prominent Chinese figure as celebrities in the media and popular culture. A substantial number of them have entered the People’s Consultative Assembly, the world of fashion, poetry reading, entertainment programmes, and talk shows. More and more successful Chinese businessmen (nearly all men!) are invited to be guest speakers in highly prestigious forums on non-economic matters. In all of these, the ethnic Chinese are simply catching up with the rest of the newly emerging, successful, multi-racial middle class.

But, secondly and more significantly, one can now see a progressive reinsertion of cultural constructs of overtly Chinese images in public space. Since 13 September 1993 a new magazine *Sinar* (Light) has entered the market with what has come to be a markedly Chinese look. Backed by the President’s brother-in-law, the weekly primarily targets the Chinese business communities and the ethnic Chinese population more generally.

More often than not, the front cover of *Sinar* presents a close-up of a prominent Chinese personality. Items in the magazine are not only predominantly related to events involving Chinese Indonesians, or the more intellectual discussion of Chinese traditions in general, but familiar Chinese terms also make a regular appearance in *Sinar* headings, even where Indonesian equivalents exist.<sup>15</sup> Although it is unclear how the general population actually feels about

the publication, there has been no strong reaction from the public to this novel act. They seem to take it for granted. But a note of qualification is necessary at this point.

The above is not meant to suggest that anti-Chinese sentiment and policies are now gone once and for all. What we see is a juxtaposition of many and often contradictory statements in public culture about the ethnic Chinese. Anti-Chinese sentiment may still be alive and well, just like racism elsewhere, but it no longer asserts itself in public as it did in the past. Occasional government policies sound anti-Chinese, as Arief Budiman observes (1994), but they target only a few of the extremely well-off, and these policies seem like a fleeting phenomenon. Anti-Chinese slogans have disappeared from the regular mass demonstrations' yells and banners, as well as from angry students' publications. Such sentiment have recently survived only in small circles, private gossip, or anonymous pamphlets.

A year before Li Peng visited Indonesia, the Soeharto government still banned the staging of a play in the North Sumatran city of Medan on the pretext that the romance story originated from a Chinese legend, Sam Pek Eng Tay. Commenting on the incident, Mely G. Tan added that one reason for the ban was that the play contained a Chinese dragon dance (1991, p. 118). In 1978, the Minister of Home Affairs instructed the Governor of Central Java to ban the dragon dance in public.<sup>16</sup> As late as 1990, the provincial government reiterated the ban.<sup>17</sup> In both instances, no one questioned or protested against the ban.

In 1993, both the Central Government and the Governor of Central Java reminded the public of the existing ban on the celebration of Chinese New Year in public places, like *vihara* (Buddhist temples), and on the performance of the dragon dance. The Governor even went as far as to ban the sale of a certain Chinese cake, traditionally consumed at New Year. In 1993, critical responses to the restrictions began to appear in the mass media (see Indrakusuma 1993; Subianto 1993). On the following Chinese New Year, the largest Indonesian daily, *Kompas*, published advertisements conveying good wishes for the Chinese holiday season. This provoked no one.

One of Indonesia's most popular novels, a highly-rated television show, and a highly acclaimed play produced at Jakarta's most

prestigious arts centre were all based on another Chinese legend, "The Lady White Snake". The dragon dance played an important part in all of these versions of the narrative. The chief appeal of this narrative may be purely apolitical: its familiar plot-line and its special audio-visual effects as presented on screen and stage. Significantly, however, the core theme that runs through it is a defence of individuals victimized by official norms and hostile treatment due to their descent!

Televised film series based on Chinese legends have not only been present, but the number and frequency of their screen appearances have increased significantly. Chinese legends in comics and novels have also taken considerable space in all major bookshops. Sympathetic Sino-Indonesian characters now appear in fiction. In August 1994, the Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs, Lt. General (Retired) Soesilo Soedarman announced a new decree allowing hotels and travel agents to publish leaflets and brochures in Chinese characters. A month later in Jakarta, the Hebei Beijing Opera Troupe presented the first stage performance from China to a New Order Indonesian audience. The pioneering work of the Chinese in the spread of Islam in Indonesia became a topic of seminar discussions in Jakarta in 1993, a cover story in the highly-respected Islamic daily *Republika* (20 March 1994), and the theme for a new film to be produced jointly by the Indonesian Government and its counterpart from the People's Republic of China (*Bernas*, 14 August 1993, p. 6). By early 1996, the debut of Islamic proselytizers of Chinese ethnic background came to prominence, so much so that a news-magazine presented a cover story on the phenomenon (GATRA 1996).

It is difficult to explain these changes and appreciate their significance solely by reference to political and economic factors. Neither the seemingly strong government, nor vigorous capitalism, let alone the Assimilation Programme, can be easily accorded that determining position. For a further investigation of the phenomenon, special attention must be paid to the three most controversial events that took place in the country during the 1990s: the murder of Marsinah in East Java, the case of the bad bank loans in Jakarta, and the large demonstration by industrial workers in the city of

Medan in North Sumatra. The three incidents captured national attention for many different reasons. For our purpose, suffice it to note that all three events point to the waning effectiveness of the stigmatizing discourse of Chinese and communist threats.<sup>18</sup>

Marsinah was a young female worker who was killed for her activism in a local workers' movement demanding better working conditions and wages as stipulated by government regulation. She worked in a factory owned by a Chinese family. It would not have been surprising if the local population quickly took revenge on a racial basis, as exemplified by a number of incidents in the recent past where Chinese families have been accused of mistreating their native house-maids.

In the case of Marsinah, the local authorities in fact propagated such a version of the events, accusing the Chinese factory manager of having raped and later killed her in his own house. The insinuation did not provoke any mass protest. In the court room, the Chinese employer showed wounds on his body. He testified that he had been kidnapped by military officers, and for nearly three weeks had been severely tortured in the military headquarters before being forced to sign a prepared confession. Upon hearing this, his workers in the court-room yelled out their support for his courage in speaking out against the official version of the events, and against the continuing intimidation against him, his family and his lawyers.<sup>19</sup>

In mid-April 1994, hundreds of thousands of industrial workers in the North Sumatran city of Medan went on strike and organized a mass rally. They demanded better wages and working conditions, freedom to organize an independent union, reinstatement of dismissed fellow workers, and an investigation into the death of a fellow worker. Violence, mainly in the suburban industrial zones and in the commercial district in the heart of the city, followed. The military detained about eighty workers, and accused leading figures of the recently established, but officially unrecognized, labour union that they had masterminded the violent demonstration. Union activists, on the other hand, claimed that the violence was instigated by state *agents provocateurs*.<sup>20</sup>

In the mass media, both in Indonesia and overseas, the incident was commonly portrayed as an anti-Chinese riot. Although a few

argued otherwise, government and non-government commentators were preoccupied with analyses of deep racial tensions that supposedly underlay the Medan incident. Leaving the question of intention aside, the focus of public debate shifted from a serious industrial dispute, if not class conflict, to historicizing ethnic and cultural tensions.

All of this occurred as an increasing volume of evidence from journalistic reports indicated something quite different. The event is striking in its lack of racism and anti-Chinese violence. True, a Chinese businessman was killed, and a fairly large number of properties were damaged. However, two things run counter to the racial interpretation. One concerns the identity of the perpetrators of the violence, and the other the victims themselves.

Concerning the agents, it remains less than certain that the Medan workers were responsible for the murder of the Chinese businessman. The degree of their responsibility for the damage of properties needs further scrutiny. Racial issues did not appear in the workers' petition, yells, banners or posters. When an anonymous pamphlet calling for anti-Chinese action suddenly circulated later in the crowd, the protesting workers were reportedly less than enthusiastic in their response. The targeting of certain Chinese was in all likelihood more a consequence of their class position than their race/ethnicity.

More importantly, this mass protest involved less violence, and caused fewer casualties and material loss than have comparable anti-Chinese riots in previous New Order history. Significantly, the victims in the Medan riot were mainly members of the big business community, while the angry protesters were exclusively workers. The rest of the ethnic population was reportedly left alone. In contrast, in most preceding anti-Chinese riots, including major ones in 1980 throughout Java, violence was perpetrated by people of various professions, economic status and age. They attacked the Chinese population regardless of their profession, economic status, age, or sex.<sup>21</sup>

Repeatedly, the military leadership accused the Medan demonstrators of using communist tactics. The security officers went further. Before detaining Mochtar Pakpahan, head of the opposition labour

union, they accused him in the mass media of being responsible for the riot in Medan, and of having a father who was associated with the communist party twenty years earlier. The communist accusation seemed to have intimidated or impressed no one.

The case of the Rp. 1.3 billion (US\$650 million) bad bank loan from the state-owned Indonesian Development Bank provoked the urban and educated sections of the population across the nation primarily because of the amount involved and those implicated in the crime: a Chinese millionaire and top state officials. In the media coverage and in the court-room, public condemnation against the Chinese businessman had a racist flavour to varying extents. However, no anti-Chinese riot ensued.

True, in June 1994 a number of strongly worded anti-Chinese pamphlets were in circulation. In one of these anonymous pamphlets, a reward of Rp. 250,000 (US\$100) was offered for a Chinese head. Fear swept most major cities in Java. Yet, paradoxically, the presence of these pamphlets may prove that, if anything, the appeal of anti-Chinese rhetoric has been dramatically in decline. In the past, no anti-Chinese riot needed a pamphlet to mobilize an angry mass.

## Conclusion

In the foregoing discussion of the significant changes that have taken place in the way the ethnic Chinese are represented in contemporary Indonesia, I have attempted to go beyond the simple question of whether Chineseness as some sort of “thing” frozen in time and space has survived or disappeared. This whole way of conceiving ethnic Chinese identity either in the present or in the past is somehow misleading since Chineseness is not — and has never been — a quantitative substance or immutable essence that can be said to be either present or absent.

It may well be that to an important degree the new interest in Chineseness by the Indonesian public can be compared, or related, to the growing interest shown by the urban middle classes in the consumption pursuits of artefacts, ethnic cuisines, architectural styles, fashions and countless other “commodity-signs” and lifestyle markers typically found in such “post-modern” spaces as shopping malls, theme parks (for example, the “Beautiful Mini Indonesia Park”), and

the like. Whatever the case may be, what is certain is that these discursive changes to Chinese ethnicity in the Indonesian context have taken place because Indonesians in the 1990s have become different subjects who construct and reconstruct, read and re-read, these elements anew. Ethnicity, like all things, is always a set of dynamic relationships of real semiotic beings. It is never a “thing”.

What remains unclear is how long the softening of this racial/cultural tension will continue, and how much further it can go. Less certain is the effect this novel phenomenon will have on the social transition from the present to the post-Soeharto period, and also perhaps to the post-New Order regime. Given the importance of sustained racial/cultural tension in the construction and protracted reproduction of the New Order regime, we have good reason to pay special attention to these questions. In addition, given the general tendency of many scholars to concentrate their analyses on the antagonism of Jakarta-based élites, especially between top bureaucratic and military leaderships, a broader view that takes into account different public discursive practices is called for.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

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1. On one occasion he writes that the ideological crusade has “been remarkably successful” in the economy, but to “a lesser degree” in society (1991, p. 128).
2. These are not new constructs. Nor are they original inventions of the New Order regime. Rather than tracing their historical origins, I will focus narrowly on present events. Historical connections will be provided only as minimally necessary.
3. For convenience, no inverted commas are used in subsequent references to the New Order Self and its Others.
4. Of course, there is nothing unique about that, as the following two quotes show. The first is from Raymond Williams and the second from Bruce King (both cited in Brennan 1990, pp. 45, 53):

Nation as a term is radically connected with “native”. We are born into relationships which are typically settled in a place. This form of primary and “placeable” bonding is of quite fundamental human and natural importance. Yet the jump from that to anything like modern-state is entirely artificial.

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Nationalism is an urban movement which identifies with the rural areas as a source of authenticity, finding in the "folk" the attitudes, beliefs, customs and language to create a sense of national unity among people who have other loyalties. Nationalism aims at ... rejection of cosmopolitan upper classes, intellectuals and others likely to be influenced by foreign ideas.

5. On the profile and political significance of Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, see John Pemberton's deconstructive analysis (1994).
6. For a comparison with neighbouring Malaysia, see Kahn (1992).
7. In 1995, the government announced a decision to introduce a new computerized system of identification cards whereby any discriminating markers that appeared on the identification cards of citizens belonging to the ethnic Chinese group would be abolished. At the same time, however, the government said that separate files on this ethnic minority would be kept stored within the new system's database (*KOMPAS* 1995). The actual enforcement of the decree had not taken place at the time of writing.
8. This is probably the only case in modern history where a major world language is officially proscribed by a strong government in a relatively long and stable political climate and has not generated protests. The only other comparable ban, this time during a period of political turmoil, was that of Catalan under Francisco Franco's fascism. From 1939 to 1945 books in Catalan were removed from public access, and many of them were burned. "Any public use of Catalan was proscribed; it was not permitted in any form in public or private schools. Secret police also attempted to penetrate private life ..." (Laitin 1989, p. 302).  
The more common practice in several countries is temporary or restricted linguistic bans. For example, in Jakarta the use of English in advertisements has been banned, especially in 1993 and 1995 (see Jakarta-Jakarta 1993; *Jakarta Post*, 1995; *Forum Keadilan*, 1995). Something similar took place in Vietnam (Schwarz 1996). In 1994, the French Government attempted to impose a new regulation to restrict the use of all foreign languages. This was met with strong objections (*Tempo*, 1994).
9. The words are Ben Anderson's (1990, p. 115), originally written in 1983. They still hold true.
10. According to Sjahrir, a supporter of economic indigenism, eighteen of the twenty-five richest Indonesian conglomerates are of ethnic Chinese origin (*Tempo*, 21 May 1994, p. 46). Three of the top ten richest Chinese businessmen in Asia are Indonesian nationals (*Jawa Pos*, 5 June 1994, p. 1). The most famous one, Liem Sioe Liong, "ranked among the forty richest men in the world" (Vatikiotis 1993, p. 50).

11. In a similar way, in Indonesia one often hears commentators publicly blaming victims of rape for having aroused the rapists' desire by speaking or behaving immorally, or wearing inappropriate clothing.
12. For an illustration, see a report in *Review of Indonesian and Malayan Affairs* (1981), p. 100.
13. Similarly, in reporting certain criminal cases, the mass media often emphasize the fact that some of the suspects may be homosexuals, although this has no relevance to the matter at hand.
14. Hong Kong and Taiwan kungfu movies have always flooded Indonesia. However, they have not received any serious attention either in national political discourse or among cultural studies scholars.
15. For instance, Hokkie for Zodiac, or Kua Mia for the Consultation section on miscellaneous matters.
16. *Sinar Harapan*, 5 August 1978, p. 2.
17. *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, 28 August 1990, p. 12.
18. As mentioned earlier, there was another attempt by the government to revive the effectiveness of the "communist threat" rhetoric following the 1996 Jakarta riot, but without much avail.
19. For more details on the case, see the fact-finding report prepared by the Indonesian Legal Aid Institute (1994). In June 1994, the State Court found him guilty and sentenced him to seventeen years in prison. A year later, having been under continued pressure from international protests, the Supreme Court acquitted him, and declared him innocent.
20. More on this can be found in the Amnesty International report (1994).
21. It is therefore ironic that many commentators attribute the relatively minor violence in Medan to the presumably cruder character of North Sumatran racial relations compared to their Javanese counterparts.
22. For a recent example of the common tendency to privilege the Jakarta-based élite, and consequently produce a pessimistic analysis of social change in contemporary Indonesia, see Robison (1993).

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