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Migration, identity and revolution: how the Chinese shaped Indonesia

Zhou Taomo

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* Historian Zhou Taomo in her new book looks at the complex ties between China and Indonesia in the cold war

* Zhou argues that migration and activism by ethnic Chinese were major forces moulding relations between Beijing and Jakarta. Here are some excerpts:

Revolutionary diplomacy and diasporic politics

On a day in June, 1955, at the Tanjung Priok harbour in Jakarta, 24-year-old Liang Yingming, a second-generation ethnic Chinese from a Cantonese family in Solo, Central Java, was about to leave Indonesia for the People's Republic of China (PRC). Before his departure, by signing the back of his Indonesian birth certificate, he agreed never to return to Indonesia. This pledge was required by the Indonesian government, which imposed strict restrictions on the re-entry of the ethnic Chinese who had been to the PRC due to fears that they would disseminate Communist ideology.

Liang then boarded the ship, where there were over 1,000 Indonesian-born Chinese high school graduates ready to travel to the PRC for higher education. The scene was merry, cheerful, and even celebratory. Waving to his father, who came to send him off, Liang happily exclaimed: "See you in Beijing!" The passengers threw colourful paper streamers towards the shore, which were caught by friends and family. These colourful paper strips, with one end held by those on board and the other by those on the land, tightened and finally broke as the ship started to move.

Fifty-seven years later, on a midsummer afternoon in Beijing, Liang, a professor emeritus of international studies at [Peking University](#), recounted this scene to me with sparkling eyes. That life-defining moment was as fresh in his memory as if it had happened just yesterday.

Although born and raised in Indonesia, from his early years Liang had been an avid participant in politics oriented towards the PRC among the overseas Chinese. A star student at the Bacheng High School of Jakarta, a Chinese-language educational institution sympathetic to the PRC, he joined the underground movement of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

After his graduation in 1950, he taught the Marxist interpretation of modern Chinese history to high school students. Shortly before his departure in 1955, he had worked with the PRC embassy in Indonesia to protect Premier Zhou Enlai against potential sabotage by the Chinese nationalists at the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung. After his return to China, part of his dream was realised: he received a college education and later had a successful academic career.

Yet history and his personal life took unexpected turns. China embarked on several political campaigns and endured a great famine, which was followed by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In Indonesia, the September Thirtieth Movement of 1965 resulted in a regime change and institutionalised discrimination against the ethnic Chinese.

As economic conditions worsened in China and its relations with Indonesia deteriorated, his family's original plan to join him in Beijing fell apart. The day at Tanjung Priok harbour turned out to be Liang's final farewell to his father, who passed away from a heart attack in 1963.

Liang's account gives us a glimpse of what it was like to live through the intertwined histories of two nations. During the cold war, the PRC and Indonesia were connected by two kinds of ties. On the state-to-state level, in the early 1960s Beijing and Jakarta forged a strategic alignment built on a shared past of anti-colonial struggle and an anticipated future of independence from the cold war superpowers. On the transnational level, even though China and Indonesia do not share geographical borders, the existence of 2.5 million ethnic Chinese in Indonesia - many of whom had economic influence but an unclear citizenship status - gave rise to a porous social frontier. In this book, I interweave the evolution of diplomatic relations with the sociopolitical lives of the Chinese in Indonesia. The overseas Chinese were, and still are, an important but highly controversial resource for the PRC's advancement of political and economic interests abroad. But the precise extent of the PRC's control over the diaspora remains obscure.

The Chinese Nationalist Party ([Kuomintang](#)) and the overseas Chinese

In the darkness of the night in late May 1948, a note signed "night ghost" (hantu malam) was attached to the door of the branch office of the pan-Chinese organisation Chung Hwa Tsung Hwee (the Chinese General Association) in Kedungbanteng, Central Java. Translated from bahasa Indonesia, it reads:

Look out! Beware!

Hi Chinese brothers!

You are in Indonesia.

You will die and be buried in the soil of Indonesia.

You are living a rich and peaceful life because of help from the Indonesian people.

You manage to live because you obtain water, food, and produce from Indonesia.

But what kind of contribution are you making to Indonesia?

Where is the proof that you want to unite with the Indonesian people?

I am warning you! Beware!!

Do not wait for social revolution!

Try to really understand the teachings of Dr Sun Yat-sen!

A few weeks later, a similar incident happened in East Java, where the number of crimes, such as robbery and blackmail against the local Chinese community, had been increasing.

The years between 1945 and 1949 mark a volatile period in both China and Indonesia. In China, a full-blown civil war broke out between the ruling Chinese Nationalist Party and the oppositional Chinese Communist Party. In Indonesia, although Sukarno proclaimed the nation's independence on August 17, 1945, the Dutch did not transfer sovereignty to the newborn Republic of Indonesia until December 27, 1949.

Between 1945 and 1949, Indonesian republican military forces (Tentara Negara Indonesia or the TNI) firmly resisted the Netherlands' attempt at recolonisation. During this time, ethnic relations between the Chinese and the pribumi (native Indonesians) deteriorated and the Chinese became a frequent target of violence. They faced destruction of property, forced evacuation, physical abuse, and murder at the hands of the TNI, particularly by the irregular forces loosely organised under it.

During a fierce battle in Bandung in March 1946, the TNI adopted a "scorched-earth policy" and burned down much of the southern half of the city, including 600 houses owned by local Chinese. The Chinese consul general publicly condemned the TNI for "a deliberate assault on the Chinese".

In June 1946, due to the country's descent into lawlessness, local criminal bands and mobs attacked the Chinese residents in Tangerang, 25km west of Jakarta.

The local Chinese were beaten, raped, or murdered even though they had lived in this area for centuries. Chinese community leaders counted 1,085 dead, 213 missing, and 15,300 displaced.

Mary Somers Heidhues, an expert on the Chinese in Indonesia, argues that the Tangerang incident was the most notorious case of violence against this ethnic minority during the Indonesian National Revolution.

Attacks on the Chinese occurred in Java as well as on the Outer Islands. Some were caused by the power vacuum that emerged shortly after the Japanese surrender, others by the return of the Dutch.

Between 1946 and 1947, Indonesian forces attacked numerous Chinese of Bagansiapiapi, one of the world's largest fishing ports, on the Sumatran coast.

In January 1947, 250 ethnic Chinese died and more than 1,000 were injured during a four-day battle between the Dutch and the TNI in Palembang, South Sumatra. The Chinese business quarter, 300 Chinese-owned houses, and the building of the Chinese consulate were burned down. In June 1947 and December 1948, the Dutch launched two major military strikes against the TNI, which were known as Dutch police actions. The Chinese were caught in the middle and were seen as enemy spies by the TNI. In July 1947, in Boemiajoe, West Java, and in Tjilongok, Central Java, the TNI killed over 300 Chinese in revenge by stabbing them with sharpened bamboo sticks, burning them, or tying them up with ropes and burying them alive. By the end of these two campaigns, hundreds of Chinese had been killed and thousands had gone missing.

In the middle of the vortex of violence, the head of the Netherlands East Indies Visual Information Service, Niels Alexander Douwes Dekker, used his camera to capture the plight of the Chinese. His photos depict charred corpses, deserted houses, helpless refugees, and protests by the ethnic Chinese with slogans in Mandarin Chinese, bahasa Indonesia, and English such as:

The Republic of Indonesia slaughtered the ethnic Chinese!

Indonesians have raped Chinese women!

The Republic of Indonesia has betrayed the Chinese!

The Republic of Indonesia has murdered the Chinese!

The Republic of Indonesia is the cradle of fascism!

We want protection from such beasts!

We demand the surrender of the Japanese deserters and war criminals who are now directing Indonesian atrocities against the Chinese!

Despite the great diversity within the Chinese communities and the significant variations in interethnic relations from region to region in Indonesia, overall a large number of ethnic Chinese experienced horrifying insecurity during the Indonesian National Revolution. This chapter places the issue of revolutionary violence against the Chinese in a transnational framework. It highlights the connections between the Chinese communities in Indonesia and the Chinese nationalist government as well as the evolving structure of international relations in the Asia-Pacific after World War Two.

The rise of hostility against the Chinese needs to be understood in light of both the short-term general disorder and the pribumi's long-standing belief that the Chinese were collaborating with the colonisers. I argue that, in addition, the Chinese nationalist government's condescending attitude towards Indonesia's anti-colonial struggle and its strengthening of ties with the diaspora discouraged the ethnic Chinese from identifying with the Republic of Indonesia and contributed to the escalation of ethnic antagonism.

The Republic of Indonesia repeatedly protested that China's persistent projection of state authority onto the ethnic Chinese interfered with its domestic affairs. In a 1948 report, the Indonesian National Police accused the embassy and consulates, Chinese Nationalist Party branches, and China-affiliated Chinese associations of functioning as "a state within a state".

Indonesia's 1946 nationality law opened a pathway to citizenship for the ethnic Chinese. Yet, with weak control over the perpetrators of ethnic violence, particularly the revolutionary youth (pemuda) who resisted military discipline, it was difficult for the Republic of Indonesia to prove that it could represent the Chinese. However, the Republic of Indonesia did not want to drive the Chinese into the arms of China, as this minority was and would be crucial to the maintenance and future recovery of the Indonesian economy. Pribumi elites were disheartened by the Chinese minority's lack of faith in the Indonesian state. They complained that the Chinese, when assaulted, sought assistance from the Chung Hwa Tsung Hwee rather than the Indonesian police.

Simultaneously claimed as citizens by both China and the Republic of Indonesia, the ethnic Chinese received no effective state protection from either government. They used their own initiative to make varied decisions in response to violence. Some organised paramilitary self-defence forces with support from the Chinese nationalist government and the Dutch, while others became disillusioned with China and aligned themselves with the Indonesian nationalist cause. But, overall, the atrocities committed during the Indonesian National Revolution caused doubts about whether an independent Indonesia would genuinely acknowledge the membership of the ethnic Chinese.

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