

Violent, Political, and Administrative Repression of the Chinese Minority in Indonesia, 1945-1998

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Abstract: The history of the Chinese minority in Indonesia is peppered with incidents of violence, but also with anti-Chinese measures of a political or administrative kind. Some speak of the “erasure” of, on the one hand, the memory of such violence, and on the other, the “erasure” of the Chinese heritage as such, for example, in the closing of Chinese schools in 1957 and 1967. The presentation reviews violent anti-Chinese outbreaks from the Indonesian Revolution, during the presidency of Soekarno, including the so-called “PP-10” against Chinese rural traders, the era of Soeharto beginning with the 1965-67 anti-Communist massacres and coming to an end in 1998 with deliberate violence against Chinese in major cities. Each of these waves of anti-Chinese measures provoked reactions: rejection, flight, even political activity. In the post-Soeharto years, Chinese Indonesians have turned to a new emphasis on their participation in Indonesian history and their contributions to Indonesian culture.

In the installation *Ranjang Hujan*, the Raining Bed (2013), and in much of his other work, the Chinese-Indonesian artist FX Harsono (whom many of you will know) speaks of “.....history washed away.”

He refers to the decades-long erasure of Chinese culture and Chinese heritage in Indonesia and the erasure of the memory of violent acts against the Chinese minority, in particular during the Indonesian Revolution.

The artist, as an insider, exhibits his works both in Indonesia and abroad in the context of the greater freedom of expression of the post-Suharto era. Today, I want to speak about such violence and erasure from the viewpoint of an historian and an outsider. Compressing a half-century of events, policies, and attitudes into a brief lecture, unfortunately, means simplification. I hope you will forgive me if in the end I fail to offer the nuances a longer text would enable and concentrate on what I think are the most important incidents and policies. Let me begin with three high points of violence, and a fourth period in between, and the reactions of the minority, as far as we can know them, that followed.

First, the **Indonesian Revolution**, 1945-49¹

In the evacuation of Bandung in March 1946, and especially during the so-called First and Second Police Actions, the Dutch attacks on the Republic in July 1947 and December 1948, the Republican forces adopted a tactic of withdrawing before the better-armed British or Dutch forces, evacuating the population, and scorched earth—denying all economic advantage to the enemy. This meant destroying factories, sugar mills, and much more. Where possible, guerillas continued to attack Dutch lines from the countryside. Evacuation and scorched earth meant burning Chinese property, forcing Chinese to move to other areas, or holding them in makeshift prisons. Some were killed outright and buried in shallow graves. In all, several thousand Chinese were killed in revolutionary violence; property losses were extensive. The violence and loss of life was worse in Sumatra than in Java, but there, no one kept count.

Among the anti-Chinese outbreaks during the Revolution, that of Tangerang is the best known because it happened practically on the outskirts of Jakarta. In May 1946, Dutch forces attacked and occupied Tangerang town, and Republican army forces evacuated the surrounding region. Irregular troops remained in rural areas, encouraging violence that turned

¹ For a more extended discussion, see Mary Somers Heidhues, “Anti-Chinese Violence in Java during the Indonesian Revolution, 1945–49,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 14:3-4 (2012), 381-401.

on Chinese villagers, burning their houses, murdering some, forcibly circumcising men and sometimes raping women. Of an estimated Chinese population of 25,000, some 1000 were dead, over 200 missing, and 15,300 refugees, overwhelmingly Chinese, fled to the city of Jakarta.

During the Revolution, most Chinese thought of themselves as neutrals and non-combatants, but neutrality was impossible. Comparatively few persons of Chinese origin supported the Republic, especially after 1946, although there were prominent exceptions. Some businessmen were active in helping the Republic acquire supplies and weapons from abroad. Most tried to survive. Thousands sought refuge in Dutch-controlled areas, leaving the impression that they sided with the Dutch. Some did.

I will not go on to enumerate the atrocities perpetrated on Chinese during the Revolution. You can read documents emanating from the Chinese Associations in major cities on Java, including an official protest directed to the United Nations. Republican strategy consisted of scorched earth terrorised and intimidated Indonesians and Chinese. You can find eyewitness depositions and grisly photographs in the archives and libraries. Dutch forces, too, were part of the violence.

In researching this question in colonial archives, I often came across accounts of Chinese Indonesian losses, seldom of non-Chinese Indonesian ones. Yet Indonesian military and civilian losses from violence, forced evacuation, hunger, and preventable disease went into the tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands.² Thousands of Indonesians perished in just three weeks in the November 1945 battle of Surabaya alone. In the first weeks of the Revolution, a “brief genocide,” as Robert Cribb calls it, brought the death of a comparatively large proportion of the Indo-European population.³

Responses to Revolutionary Violence

Basically, responses were, apart from futile protests, first, movement from the countryside to cities for safety. Emigration abroad was limited by the difficulty of finding a safe and open destination—a few students left for China or the Netherlands, but China was in a state of civil war, and countries like the USA or Australia were closed to Chinese.

A second reaction was **rejection of the Republic of Indonesia**. Between December 1949 and December 1951, Chinese born in Indonesia who had been Netherlands subjects (about 60% of all Chinese) could automatically become Indonesian citizens. The Indonesian government thought that about ten percent might declare for Chinese citizenship instead, but when the tally was finally made in 1953, up to 40% of those eligible, between 600,000 and 700,000 persons, had officially rejected Indonesian citizenship. When this number is added to the foreign-born Chinese (and their children), who were already Chinese citizens, this meant that over half of the Chinese in Indonesia were aliens.⁴ A small number of Chinese also adopted Dutch citizenship.

A third reaction was silence. Although the Tangerang incident was well-publicized because of its closeness to Jakarta, silence covered most other incidents. Journalist Kwee Thiam Tjing

² See comments of Bart Luttikhuis at <http://www.kitlv.nl/blog-100-000-magic-victim-number/> accessed 26 May 2016.

³ Robert Cribb, “The Brief Genocide of Eurasians in Indonesia, 1945/46,” in A. Dirk Moses, ed., *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York, 2008), 424–439.

⁴ David Mozingo, *Chinese Policy toward Indonesia, 1949-1967* (Ithaca 1976), 97, citing an official of the Indonesian Department of Justice.

wrote a graphic memoir of anti-Chinese violence in Malang, *Indonesia dalam Api dan Bara*, published in 1947, which soon vanished from bookshops. It was only republished in 2004.⁵ An impressive memorial, located near the town of Nganjuk in East Java, not far from Madiun, remembers some 800 persons killed during the hostilities. In December 1948, the local Indonesian military commander, when Dutch forces approached during the Second Police Action, gathered all the male Chinese into a warehouse and set fire to it. Anyone who tried to flee was shot. Siauw Giok Tjhan in his memoirs describes this “cruel” and “ruthless” massacre that left Nganjuk a “city of widows.” The memorial was erected in 1951-52, but it does not explain how these people died. Only in 1981 was Siauw’s account published, outside Indonesia.⁶

The name Siauw Giok Tjhan of course also stands for a **fourth reaction—joining Indonesian politics**. After some other organizations were unsuccessful, in March 1954, Siauw helped found Baperki to lobby for the interests of Indonesian citizens. Baperki was the Consultative Body (technically not a political party) for Indonesian Citizenship. *Citizen* (WNI, *warganegara Indonesia*) was a word that almost always meant Chinese.

The Sukarno Period

Some people believe that things were good for the Chinese under President Sukarno, but this is not necessarily true. In the 1950s, parliament attempted to dismantle what nationalists called the “colonial economy” by limiting Chinese business and promoting indigenous entrepreneurs. Citizenship also remained a problem, and this opened the door for what Jacques Bertrand called the “institutionalized exclusion” of the Chinese.⁷ Martial law after 1957 put entire regions under military rule. “PP-10” followed in 1959; this was originally a proposal from the Minister of Trade to forbid aliens from engaging in retail trade outside of about 100 major cities in all Indonesia (which would end their role in rural crop-buying and lending). Some local military commanders then expanded the regulation to require all aliens in most provinces to leave rural areas. This was brutally implemented in West Java, forcing many families to flee to Jakarta or other cities.

Another anti-Chinese measure that originated with regional military commanders in 1957 was the closing of all Chinese-language schools to Indonesian citizens. This reduced their number from 1800 to about 500. How to cope with the tens of thousands of displaced pupils?

Response

A first response was an exodus of some 120,000 persons in the next two years, mostly to China. China sent ships to pick up the emigrants, enabling many who had previously desired to do so, but could not afford to, to depart. About one-third of the emigrants were young people hoping to study in China. Anny Tan of *Retour Amoy*⁸ and her family—her children had attended Dutch schools—were among those who departed for China. A few left for Taiwan, Europe, and North America during this crisis.

⁵ Tjamboek Berdoeri [pseud., Kwee Thiam Tjing], *Indonesia dalam api dan bara* (Jakarta [1947] 2004). The Chinese inscription on the Nganjuk tomb read (in ca. 1997), “who were victims”. See Claudine Salmon and Anthony Siu, eds., *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Indonesia* (under the direction of Wolfgang Franke) II:2 (Singapore 1997), 740-41.

⁶ Siauw Giok Tjhan, *Lima jaman perwujudan integrasi wajar* (n.p.1981), 142-143.

⁷ *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia* (Cambridge 2004), 59.

⁸ Leonard Blussé, *Retour Amoy: Een vrouwenleven in Indonesië, Nederland en China* (Amsterdam 2000).

Another reaction was the implementation of the Dual Nationality Treaty with China in 1959-61. Supposedly this ended the uncertainty of the citizenship status of Chinese Indonesians—but it applied only to those who were Indonesian citizens, the majority continued to be aliens. Finally, in 1963, a trivial dispute set off anti-Chinese violence in Bandung and neighboring cities. The background may have been a protest against Sukarno's politics. Yap Tjwan Bing, who had helped design Indonesian independence in 1945 and who was a loyal adherent of the Nationalist Party, saw his property sacked and his family threatened. To protect and support his disabled son, he reluctantly decided to leave temporarily for California, but his exile became permanent.⁹

The Transition to Suharto, 1965-67

The 50th anniversary of the September 30, 1965 incident has recalled the mass murders following General Suharto's takeover of power. While it is true that anti-Chinese violence and anti-Chinese propaganda, as well as *heritage erasure* and *institutionalized exclusion* followed, the victims were mostly indigenous Indonesians somehow associated with the Indonesian Communist Party—500,000 or many more, while several times that number were arrested, exiled, and deprived of their civil rights. The vast majority of these victims were not Chinese. But this was a time when everything Chinese became suspect.

The massacres took place mostly in rural areas, where Chinese no longer lived. Exceptions were the violent expulsions of some 10,000 Chinese from Aceh, perhaps 50,000 from rural West Kalimantan, and others from parts of East Java, with many deaths, all of this supposedly to enforce the old bans on alien trade and residence in rural areas. A recent study has called the Aceh expulsions a “genocide” of the Chinese. I have not had access to the study (by Jessica Melvin) and want to reserve judgment.¹⁰

In the following years of Suharto's rule *heritage erasure* meant that all Chinese-language schools were closed, as were nearly all Chinese-language newspapers, even the Chinese temples were Indonesianized, being forced to emphasize their Buddhist tradition and even call themselves *vihara* or *rumah ibadat*.

Reactions to Suharto's Policies: Exodus and Opportunity

Again, exodus followed. Reasons for leaving Indonesia included physical or psychological threats, bureaucratic harassment and reduced opportunity. The turmoil was frightening. The economic situation had been gone downhill since the late 1950s. From 1966, all Chinese were called not the polite *Tionghoa* but the offensive *Cina*. Ang Jan Goan, long-time publisher of the newspaper *Sin Po*, who had consciously chosen Indonesian citizenship in 1960, speaks in his memoirs of “horrible years--*tahun-tahun yang mengerikan*”). When in 1968 friends heard the (false) rumor that he had been arrested, he and his wife chose to join their son in Canada.¹¹

Wu Da Ying, a graduate of a Chinese school who could not enter a public university, remembers a truck full of young demonstrators that passed him on the street in Jakarta, yelling “*Cina pulang*” and spitting. He too left for Canada, joining an uncle there.¹²

⁹ Yap Tjwan Bing, *Meretas Jalan Kemerdekaan: Otobiografi Seorang Pejuang Kemerdekaan* (Jakarta 1988).

¹⁰ But see Yen-ling Tsai and Douglas Kammen, “Anti-Communist Violence and the Ethnic Chinese in Medan, North Sumatra,” in Douglas Kammen and Katharine McGregor, eds., *The Contours of Mass Violence in Indonesia, 1965-68* (Honolulu 2012), 131-155.

¹¹ *Memoir Ang Yan Goan, 1894-1984* (Jakarta 2009), 368.

¹² Wu Da Ying, *Chinese-Indonesian: An Odyssey through Racism, Ethnicity and Science* (Irvine, 2013).

From the late 1950s, admission of Chinese to the university, especially to popular faculties like medicine and law, was restricted. Private universities were expensive and/or not accredited. During the 1960s, Western countries began to open immigration to Chinese. The US and Canada used a special test to actively recruit doctors during the 1960s. Autobiographies of Chinese-Indonesian doctors who left for North America around this time confirm their motivations: getting ahead professionally, especially because training in medical specialties was virtually closed to them (although they often had served the government for years in remote and difficult posts), giving their children better chances, and fear of violence and disorder.¹³

Still, the Suharto era was not only negative for the Chinese minority. In the 1980s, nearly all Chinese in Indonesia became citizens, ending—theoretically—the question of legal status (but not exclusion or erasure). Political stability, although repressive, and economic growth lifted general welfare. Some people insisted, “as long as the economy is good, Indonesians will be satisfied and we will have nothing to fear.” Of course, some Chinese profited enormously from the new economy—the *cukong*—by forming close ties to political-military powerholders.

The 1998 Transition

The beginning of the end of Suharto’s rule may have come with riots in Medan in 1994. Workers were protesting about working conditions, but plundering and destruction of Chinese property followed. Anti-Chinese outbreaks followed in several places in Java, Makassar, Banjarmasin, and again in Medan in the years 1996-1999. Often the spark that lit the explosions had nothing to do with Chinese, but ended in torching of supermarkets, shops, cars, and houses. Often, conservative Islamic elements who felt left out of wealth and influence were the perpetrators.

Unquestionably, especially after the Asian monetary crisis, the government contributed to anti-Chinese sentiment by harping on the “gap (*kesenjangan*)” between rich (meaning Chinese) and poor (meaning native—ironically, many natives, especially Suharto’s own family, had been shameless profiteers). When violence broke out, politicians excused the outbreaks by referring to the “wealth gap” and blaming Chinese for the monetary crisis. In some cases, scores of young men on motorcycles provoked violence and arson. Those who might have suppressed the violence and protected the innocent stood aside.

In May 1998, in Jakarta, after four students were shot during non-violent protests against Suharto’s rule, in Jakarta, Solo, and elsewhere, vicious, coordinated attacks on Chinese property and persons, including rape and sexual humiliation of Chinese women, followed. Perpetrators included truckloads of young, athletic, black-booted men, typical of the paramilitary organizations controlled and manipulated by certain army leaders. They encouraged city people to enter and loot shops and malls, then set fire to the buildings. Of over 1000 dead, most were actually not Chinese, but this does not change the fact that atrocities and violence were directed first to Chinese.

Many Chinese, as well as foreigners, some say 150,000, fled Java for Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Australia, or the less wealthy went to Bali or West Kalimantan. Probably most returned when the political situation changed. Vice-President Habibie, who succeeded Suharto, opened an investigation by official and NGO-initiatives that produced a lengthy

¹³ Tjien O. Oei, *Memoirs of Indonesian Doctors* [1 and 2] (Xlibris, Ebook, 2009)

report pointing to high military officers as responsible, but few if any perpetrators were called to account.

Relief came with the subsequent presidencies of Gus Dur and Megawati, who rolled back most anti-Chinese administrative measures, opening the door wide for Chinese culture and Chinese festivities, and probably improved the atmosphere greatly. Bureaucratic harassment has been reduced, if not eliminated. Serious interethnic violence, usually along religious lines, plagued these presidencies, but it was not directed to Chinese as such.

Conclusion

Violence against Chinese should be seen in the context of violence that punctuates Indonesian history. The Revolution was violent; many of the following years were marked by violence, not merely against the Chinese minority—Darul Islam and regional rebellions come to mind—think of Aceh and later, Papua. The military and certain Islamic groups have been repositories of violence, as have, as John Sidel notes, the *kampung* people.¹⁴ A potential for anti-Chinese violence remains.

On the other hand, Chinese responses since 1998 have included modest participation in political life (the mayor of Jakarta, the deputy governor of West Kalimantan) and they have emphasized their rootedness in Indonesia, particularly as *peranakan*. They are a *suku*, and thus *pribumi*, and their efforts have contributed to modern Indonesia, just as certain individuals, for example Admiral John Lie, subject of a recent biography, contributed to the fight for Indonesian independence.

In 2006, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono helped dedicate a new site at the Jakarta tourist attraction Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, the Taman Budaya Tionghoa (Garden of Chinese Culture). Since 2014 it has also included the Hakka Museum, and in that museum, the Wall of Prominent Chinese Indonesians (including non-Hakkas) with the moving inscription “Indonesia, we are loyal/devoted to you!”

¹⁴ *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (Ithaca, 2006).