

# The Emergence of Chinese Indonesian Associations and the Reconstruction of Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Era Indonesia

Cuixinyue

School of International Studies /Academy of Overseas Chinese Studies, Jinan University, Guangzhou, 510632;

**Abstract:** This paper argues that, driven by the dual forces of social democratization and the Chinese Indonesians' pursuit to escape social marginalization and prevent the recurrence of events like the May 1998 riots, two types of Chinese Indonesian non-governmental organizations emerged after 1998: socio-cultural associations and anti-discrimination organizations. These Chinese associations strive to advocate for equal citizenship in Indonesia and promote ethnic harmony and coexistence, thereby fostering the reconstruction of Chinese identity.

**Key words:** Chinese Indonesian; Chinese Association; Identity Reconstruction; Chineseness

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## Introduction

During Suharto's 32-year New Order period (1966-1998) in Indonesia, the government resolutely implemented a coercive assimilation policy towards the Chinese community. While the Chinese community largely assimilated into the local society, it is lamentable that they did not attain equal citizenship status compared to other ethnic groups. Particularly during periods of social turmoil, the vulnerable position of the Chinese community became even more pronounced. Influenced by months of economic crisis, Indonesia erupted in intense social conflict in 1998. From May 12 to 14 of that year, large-scale atrocities targeting ethnic Chinese broke out in several major Indonesian cities. Chinese Indonesians were robbed and killed, their homes and shops looted and burned, and women were subjected to rape, among other violent acts.

The Western academic community has explored the reasons behind the concentrated emergence of Chinese community organizations in the post-Suharto era. Some argue that after 32 years of identity suppression, ethnic Chinese were driven by a form of symbolic identity or emotional belonging to form or join political parties or social organizations based on ethnic affiliation. This was seen as an expression of their urgent desire for public recognition after prolonged repression of their Chinese identity, as well as a strong discontent with the ethnic violence of 1998. Building on existing studies, this paper attempts to integrate official information from Chinese community organizations with policies toward ethnic Chinese before and after Indonesia's democratic reforms. It aims to offer an original interpretation of the concentrated rise of new Chinese associations after 1998 and to examine how these organizations have contributed to the reconstruction of Chinese Indonesian identity by defending their civil rights, preserving cultural heritage, and engaging with broader Indonesian social issues.

## 1 Emerging Chinese Community Organizations in the Post-Suharto Era

Following the May 1998 tragedy, a number of Chinese community organizations emerged in Indonesian society. During this unique historical period, these organizations played a significant role in promoting the revival of Chinese culture, safeguarding ethnic interests, and enhancing the social status of the Chinese community. Existing research has adopted various approaches to classify these Chinese community organizations. This paper adopts Susan Giblin's classification framework for Chinese community organizations, categorizing them into political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and religious associations. Among these, NGOs are further subdivided into socio-cultural associations and anti-discrimination associations. The study focuses primarily on NGOs, with the following section providing a detailed

introduction to several influential and large-scale socio-cultural and anti-discrimination associations.

## 1.1 Socio-cultural Associations

### 1.1.1 Indonesia Chinese Clan Social Association (Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia, PSMTI)

The Indonesian Chinese Clan Association (PSMTI) was established on September 28, 1998, by retired Indonesian Chinese Brigadier General Tedy Jusuf. It was the first Chinese social organization formed after the May riots. The predecessor of the association was the "Ash Houses" in Jakarta, where Chinese families stored the ashes of deceased relatives and regularly gathered to commemorate them. Internally, the Ash Houses were managed according to clan surnames, and according to the association's 2000-2003 handbook, it initially housed 69 clan surnames. The founding members of the association later consisted of 88 Indonesian Chinese individuals representing different Chinese clans. Today, the Indonesian Chinese Clan Association remains active and has established branches in over 300 cities and regions across the country. However, the association's persistent practice of accepting only ethnic Chinese members and excluding non-Chinese individuals has, to some extent, led to a decline in its membership. The association places strong emphasis on preserving traditional Chinese culture. Its founder, Tedy Jusuf, even published a book titled *A Glimpse of Chinese Culture in Indonesia*, which provides a detailed introduction to Chinese customs related to weddings, funerals, festivals, traditional attire, and more.

### 1.1.2 The Chinese Indonesian Association (Perhimpunan Indonesia Tionghoa, INTI)

On February 5, 1999, the Chinese Indonesian Association (abbreviated as "INTI") was founded by Indonesian pharmacist Eddie Lembong (Wang Youshan). The association also welcomes non-ethnic Chinese to join.

The Chinese Indonesian Association (INTI) upholds the nationalist spirit of freedom, equality, diversity, inclusion, and democracy as embodied in Pancasila and the Preamble to the 1945 Indonesian Constitution. It is not affiliated with any political party and is determined to be an advanced, diverse, democratic organization that respects human rights and is oriented towards Indonesia, playing an active role in the nation-building process. The two organizations mentioned above are categorized as socio-cultural groups. Initially, their membership was largely composed of Peranakan Chinese approximately sixty years old, most of whom had received a Chinese education and held personal memories of living through the severe challenges that impacted Chinese culture around 1965.

## 1.2 Anti-Discrimination Associations

### 1.2.1 Indonesian Anti-Discrimination Movement (Gerakan Perjuangan Anti Diskriminasi, GANDI)

In contrast to the senior members commonly found in socio-cultural associations, anti-discrimination organizations are often led by younger individuals. The Indonesian anti-discrimination movement (GANDI) was established on November 6, 1998, at the home of Abdurrahman Wahid by Nico Krisnanto, a Chinese Indonesian businessman who was then working for the Lippo Group.

Unlike socio-cultural associations, GANDI has never defined itself as an ethnicity-based Chinese organization since its inception. Both in terms of membership recruitment and the target audience and objectives of its work, GANDI operates with the entire Indonesian nation in mind. In its action charter, GANDI states, "Although ethnic conflicts have emerged across the country, only the Chinese community continues to face unfair treatment at the legal level." The organization aims to collaborate with other social groups to lobby the government to abolish all unjust laws.

### 1.2.2 Solidarity for Motherland and Nation (Solidaritas Nusa Bangsa, SNB)

Another organization with a function similar to GANDI that emerged after 1998 is Solidarity for Motherland and Nation (SNB). Since its establishment on June 5, 1998, Solidarity for Motherland and Nation voluntarily provided shelter for victims of the May riots and specifically formed an organization called the "Alliance for the Victims of the May Riots." This group aimed to identify those responsible for the tragedy and seek economic compensation for the victims. Later, under Ester Jusuf's leadership, Solidarity for Motherland and Nation joined forces with other organizations to challenge various discriminatory laws in Indonesia, advocating for equal rights for ethnic minorities. Like GANDI, Solidarity for Motherland and Nation does not consider itself an ethnicity-based Chinese organization.

## **2 Reasons for the Surge of Chinese Indonesian Associations in the Post-Suharto Era**

### **2.1 Driven by Indonesia's democratic reforms**

The development of Chinese community organizations in Indonesia experienced a fluctuating process after the country's independence. Between 1945 and 1957, due to the liberal policies adopted by the Indonesian government, overseas Chinese organizations developed rapidly. For instance, in the early post-war period, there were only about fifty or sixty such organizations in Jakarta, but the number soon grew to approximately 200. However, the situation began to change in 1958. In October of that year, the Indonesian government enacted Law No. 2 of 1958 concerning the prohibition of various organizations established by "foreign" entities that had no diplomatic relations with Indonesia, and announced the dissolution of some overseas Chinese organizations supported by the Taiwanese authorities.

In 1969, the Indonesian government approved and enacted Presidential Decision No. 240 of 1967 on the Basic Policy Regarding Citizens of Foreign Descent. It stipulated that the nurturing and education of citizens of foreign descent were to be conducted through a process of assimilation, with the primary aim of preventing the existence of racially exclusive lifestyles. Empowered by these decrees, the assimilation policy swept across the archipelago more rampantly. In April 1966, the government ordered the closure of Chinese community organizations. Subsequently, Law No. 37 of 1967 stipulated that foreign citizen organizations could only be established in certain cities or regions based on the size of the foreign population, subject to government approval and supervision, and their activities were restricted to healthcare, religion, burial affairs, sports, and recreation.

The 32-year-long Suharto regime came to an end following the "May Riots." The riots dealt a heavy blow to the Indonesian economy, prompting foreign investors to withdraw their capital and forcing many ethnic Chinese to flee the country. Faced with strong condemnation from the international community and recurring alarms regarding the domestic economic situation, the Indonesian government was compelled to revise its policies towards the Chinese community. After Abdurrahman Wahid came to power, he implemented even more friendly policies towards the Chinese community, "All Indonesian citizens are equal, regardless of race, religion, and culture." Furthermore, he strongly supported the work of Chinese organizations.

### **2.2 To empower the Chinese community and help them overcome their vulnerable social status, thereby preventing the recurrence of violence**

When the May Riots erupted and all ethnic Chinese, regardless of their region or social class, faced indiscriminate attacks from Indonesian society, the community underwent a severe identity crisis. They realized that, no matter how long they had lived in Indonesia or how proficient they were in the Indonesian language, they were still excluded by "Indonesians."

Thus, the 1998 riots served as a stark reminder to the Chinese that they were fundamentally a single community. Merely abandoning their cultural identity would not earn them acceptance from other ethnic groups. In practice, both the Indonesian government and society continued to view the Chinese as a monolithic group. During times of crisis, the government not only failed to protect them but was often the driving force behind the persecution. The Chinese could rely only on themselves for protection.

In order to overcome the vulnerable position of the Chinese in society, many ethnic Chinese established or joined cross-ethnic social organizations. These groups aimed to strengthen inter-ethnic dialogue and cooperation on an equal footing, working from a human rights perspective to secure equal rights for the Chinese as an ethnic minority in Indonesia. The leader of the Indonesian Chinese Clan Association (PSMTI), Tedy Jusuf, also stated that the reason the association exclusively accepts ethnic Chinese members is that since other ethnic groups in Indonesia have their own organizations, the Chinese community should as well. Precisely for this reason, many social organizations focused on preserving Chinese cultural heritage and safeguarding the rights of the Chinese community, such as the aforementioned PSMTI, GANDI (Indonesian Chinese Association for Social Justice), and INTI (Chinese Indonesian Association), emerged collectively after 1998.

### 3 The Role of Chinese Indonesian Associations in the Reconstruction of Identity

During the New Order period, the Indonesian government's policies toward the ethnic Chinese were influenced by radical generals such as Suharto and Nasution. On one hand, a comprehensive assimilation policy was implemented to sever the cultural, psychological, and emotional ties between the Chinese community and China, aiming to achieve "stability and security." On the other hand, Chinese capital was utilized to advance economic development goals. Under this policy direction, discriminatory laws and regulations targeting the Chinese community increased rather than decreased.

In 1967, Suharto signed "Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967 Concerning Chinese Religion, Beliefs, and Customs", which stipulated that Chinese religious ceremonies could only be conducted within the confines of the home or in private settings, and that conspicuous Chinese religious or customary festivities were prohibited in public spaces. This plethora of discriminatory laws firmly entrenched the Chinese community in the position of "second-class citizens." The May riots further exacerbated the situation, making the Chinese community profoundly realize the necessity of self-reliance and self-preservation, and the need to use legal means to protect their legitimate rights and interests. Consequently, the Chinese community organizations that emerged after 1998 universally prioritized the elimination of all legal provisions discriminatory towards the Chinese, making it their primary mission to secure equal legal rights for the ethnic Chinese.

Ultimately, through the concerted efforts of numerous community organizations, the discriminatory legal provisions were gradually repealed one by one. On September 16, 1998, the Indonesian government issued Presidential Instruction No. 26, which mandated the cessation of using the terms "indigenous" (pribumi) and "non-indigenous" (non-pribumi) in the formulation and implementation of all policies. It required government institutions and officials to treat all citizens equally and to revoke regulations permitting discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, or race. The instruction also called for a review of all unequal laws or government regulations in business and public sectors. In 1999, President Abdurrahman Wahid stated in a media interview, "The new Indonesian government guarantees that it will amend and revoke all unjust laws and policies enacted by the previous government that discriminated against the Chinese. To implement true democracy, these regulations must change."

In January 2000, Wahid signed Presidential Decree No. 6, which revoked the 1967 Presidential Instruction No. 14 Concerning Chinese Religion, Beliefs, and Customs. This decree henceforth permitted Indonesian Chinese to publicly celebrate traditional festivals such as the Chinese New Year in public spaces, including holding public celebrations and performing lion and dragon dances. Organizations including the Indonesian Chinese Clan Social Association (PSMTI), the Chinese Indonesian Association (INTI), the Indonesian Citizens' Association (PSI), and various Chinese religious groups issued statements expressing their gratitude to President Wahid for implementing policies favorable to the Chinese community.

### 4 Conclusion

In summary, following the May 1998 riots, Indonesia found itself compelled to address severe domestic social unrest and mounting pressure from the international community. This led to the abandonment of the coercive assimilation policies characteristic of the Suharto regime and the initiation of a democratic reform process. During this period, the government conducted a comprehensive review and revocation of discriminatory policies targeting the ethnic Chinese community, progressively easing restrictions on their religious practices, traditional customs, and organizational activities. Consequently, Chinese community organizations reemerged and began to operate and develop freely.

These organizations have persistently lobbied the government to abolish all discriminatory laws against the Chinese community, accelerate Indonesia's democratization process, and create more opportunities for the Chinese to voice their interests while safeguarding the civil rights of ethnic minorities. Furthermore, these organizations have led by example in contributing to Indonesian society. They encourage their members to engage in social affairs and actively fulfill their social responsibilities as non-governmental organizations within the nation, thereby promoting the common development of the Chinese community and other ethnic groups in Indonesia.

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Author Information:Cui Xinyue (崔馨月, 2000. 7), female. Education: master’ s student Unit: International Relations / Institute of Overseas Chinese Studies, Jinan University.. Main research interests include: Indonesian studies and overseas Chinese studies.