

Defining New Domains: The Identities of Indonesian Returned Overseas Chinese

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Introduction

Social and historical studies show that the Chinese have been in Indonesia for a long time. At first, their interaction with the natives ran smoothly so that there appeared a semblance of cultural assimilation. But this changed when the Dutch came to the archipelago. The Dutch colonial administration did not like the assimilation occurring between these two communities, and took all possible measures to break the cultural and social alliance. During the colonial era, the Chinese were confined to the trading posts. Thus, the contact between the Chinese and the natives was limited to business transactions. The state also restricted Chinese residence to a special quarter known as the *Pecinan* (Chinatown). The Dutch created a colonial caste structure in which the state recognized three categories of people: at the top were the “white” Europeans (and those who were accorded “equal” status such as the Japanese); in the middle were the “yellow” foreign eastern ethnics, including the Chinese; and at the bottom of the hierarchy were the “dark” local population in their position of inferiority (Anderson, 2000:122). This strengthened the segregation and division between the Chinese and the natives, through which the Dutch colonial administration maintained their power. The result was a disruptive relationship between the Chinese and the indigenous people. This disruptive relationship continued even after Indonesia became independent. It was demonstrated by the anti-Chinese riots that happened in some cities. The riots culminated on 16 November 1959 after which the government issued Presidential Decree No. 10, prohibiting the alien Chinese from engaging in retail business in the villages and rural areas. They were asked to transfer the ownership of their businesses to Indonesian citizens and to move out. This prohibition was intended for alien Chinese only, not for the Chinese who had Indonesian citizenship. But the effect of this ban was disastrous for all Chinese, both Indonesian citizens and aliens, and led to the mass exodus of the Chinese to China. This increased the number of Chinese who had left Indonesia for China since the early 1950s, an exodus that continued until the late 1960s. The majority of those who left were young students.

The overseas Chinese who faced discrimination and persecution in Indonesia were attracted to the idea of returning to China, especially when the Chinese government introduced policies to attract the overseas Chinese. But the returnees found themselves facing serious problems. Besides adjusting to a different social environment, the returnees had to deal with the

political situation from the late 1950s to the 1960s, especially the Cultural Revolution, which affected every aspect of their lives. There were policies that were detrimental to them. The anti-right movement, which ascended to power during this time, criticized the policy towards the overseas Chinese. It criticized the Returned Overseas Chinese especially because of their “foreign connection” and the preferential treatment they received. This criticism led to the persecution of the Returned Overseas Chinese. They were often equated with the bourgeoisie, and hence, considered reactionary. Disappointed with and discouraged by what had happened to them, many of the Returned Overseas Chinese wanted to get out of China. They joined the exodus that crossed the Chinese border to go to Hong Kong, although there were also many who chose to stay in China. In this research, I would like to investigate the adaptation and identity problems of the returned overseas Chinese from Indonesia who now live in China. The questions this study attempts to address are: (1) How did the Returned Overseas Chinese from Indonesia adapt to and negotiate with the local social and cultural environment? (2) How did they define their socio-cultural identity?

Methodology

In this study, I used qualitative and quantitative approaches. Three methods were used to collect data: questionnaires, focused-group discussions, and interviews. The questionnaires covered the following areas: (1) demographic information (close and open-ended questions), (2) China’s image before and after they arrived (close questions), (3) image about self (close and open-ended questions), (4) opinions about the connection between China and Indonesia’s changing policy towards the ethnic Chinese (close and open-ended questions), and (5) aspirations (open-ended questions). These questionnaires are meant to collect initial data, surface profiles of the respondents, and create a general picture of the returnees from Indonesia. The respondents are from various occupations and regions in China. The areas are chosen based on: (1) the distinct qualities of a city or region which I assume have influenced the respondents who live there, (2) accessibility of sources in those cities, and (3) the existence of a substantial number of Returned Overseas Chinese from Indonesia whom I could contact. I selected respondents living in Beijing, Dalian, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Guilin, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Quanzhou, Shanghai, Shenyang, Tianjin and Xiamen. The number of questionnaires returned was 582.

However, the data I got from the questionnaires were not enough to answer the research questions in this study. Thus, a more in-depth study was conducted. Out of 582 respondents, 60 participants were invited for focused-group discussion and/or interview sessions based on their answers to the questionnaires. Only 40 participants agreed to participate.

The focused-group discussion was held in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai, as there were five respondents or more who lived in those cities willing to participate in the discussion.

The discussion was held in an informal and relaxed setting. This focused-group discussion was then followed by individual interviews.

There are two types of interview. One is a focused and structured interview guided by a schedule. It usually lasted from 45 minutes to one hour. The other type is a casual, “everyday” conversation. This type of interview was especially used for those who felt uncomfortable with the first type, and it was held when I visited the respondents. The questionnaires, the focused-group discussion, and the interviews were conducted in the Indonesian language since I do not speak Mandarin and all respondents speak Indonesian.

Reasons for Returning to China

From the 1950s to the late 1960s, due to the political crisis in Indonesia and a new wave of Chinese nationalism with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, many overseas Chinese from Indonesia returned to China. The majority were young people (Lu, 1956:42). The respondents in this study returned to China for various reasons: 517 people (88.83%) returned to China for study. After finishing high school, they felt they would not have opportunities for their tertiary education in Indonesia, especially since they came from Chinese schools; 23 respondents, (3.95%) admitted that they returned to China because they were forced to do so, due to their citizenship; 42 people (7.22%) mentioned other reasons, such as the desire to help in building a new China.

These figures show that education was a priority. As Goldley pointed out, “While the re-sinicization taking place in Chinese-language schools in Indonesia was surely a factor in their decision to go, most of our informants still placed education over political considerations” (2002:338), especially when the Indonesian government closed many of the Chinese schools. Nevertheless, studying and living in China was not easy because of social and cultural differences.

Problems and Adaptation

Because of the unfavorable political situation in Indonesia, the idea of returning to China appealed to the Indonesian Chinese, especially since they were still Chinese citizens. Because they had never been to China before, “returning” to China was like uprooting themselves and starting a new life in a new country. And they thought they knew and understood China. This was also one factor that encouraged them to return to China, their “imputed homeland.” They were encouraged by the familiarization brought about by their teachers’ “indoctrinations” and the observance of family rituals and practices. But what they knew was an imagined China. Upon arrival, they realized that the China in their minds was different from the actual one. The

majority, 396 (68.04%) respondents, said that the China they saw was totally different from what they imagined while still in Indonesia, while 186 (31.96%) respondents said that the China they knew and the one they saw were different. The discrepancy between the mythical China and the real China complicated their situation. They were also shocked by the bad conditions and the hard life there. This triggered cultural and social problems.

Besides the bad condition and the hard life, another problem they encountered was dietary. They had difficulties adjusting to the local food. They said that the Chinese food in Indonesia was different from what they found in China; the names might be the same, but the taste was different. They also encountered problems in dressing. When they were in Indonesia, they were free to wear any color and style they liked. At that time, western influence in Indonesia was relatively more pervasive, so styles in clothes were also influenced by western fashion. But this was discouraged by the Chinese state which saw western culture as imperialist culture. The people in China had to wear dark colors and Chinese-style clothes. Both male and female felt uncomfortable in the local fashion and said that they did not like the dark colors and uniform styles. But they could not go against what was acceptable. The problems mentioned above may not be major. However, they do show the respondents' attachment to particular cultural habits. The returnees from Indonesia were still accustomed to eating Indonesian food and following Indonesian fashion. In this way, they still showed their attachment to Indonesia.

Another thing that also shows their cultural attachment to Indonesia is their use of the Indonesian language, especially when they are among themselves. Many returnees who came to China to study did not have the Chinese language proficiency level required in Chinese universities. That was why the Chinese government established preparatory schools for them and this inadvertently gave them an opportunity to mingle with fellow returnees from Indonesia. Because of the Chinese government's policy to distinguish them, they did not have many opportunities to meet the local people. As a result, outside the classroom, their conversation often slipped into Indonesian or Javanese. This contributed to their attachment towards Indonesia, on the one hand, and alienation from China, on the other.

The local society also played a role in the process of alienation. In the mid-1950s, when integration was easier between the local and Overseas Chinese students, the latter already felt alienated and different from the former. In the heightened political radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s, many Overseas Chinese were accused of being counter-revolutionaries, foreign spies, and capitalist dogs, which made them even more alienated. They were not considered Chinese and doubt was cast on their Chinese-ness (Goldley 2002).

One overseas Chinese student who returned to China remembered that he thought he looked Chinese and dressed in the Chinese way. Yet people in Beijing often asked where he was from. He said, "There always seemed to be this gap, this awareness, that I wasn't part of 'them.' No matter how I tried, I could never close this gap, never make them feel that I was also

Chinese” (Frolic, 1980:118). This shows that the society where they lived also played a role in the process of alienation, and made them feel different from the locals. The local Chinese considered themselves as the “self,” and the returnees as the “others.”

In spite of these unfavorable circumstances, the Returned Overseas Chinese entertained the idea that at least in China, they could study in the university. And indeed they could study in the university. But to their surprise, they were not allowed to choose the subjects they wished to study. The government chose the subjects for them.

Many protested by boycotting lectures. But their protests fell on deaf ears and even triggered severe criticism. The publication of the Overseas Chinese Affairs, *Qiao Wu Bao* (November 1957), stated that the government should do something against the “wicked elements.” And in December 1958, it said that it was “saturated with lethargic attitudes,” and “selfish exploitative thinking who refused to study and accept reform” (quoted in Fitzgerald, 1972:139). Therefore, they should be reeducated so they would accept the purpose and meaning of “socialist construction,” a euphemism for manual labor. They were trained to increase their laboring skills by working in the village.

This condition disappointed many of the returnees. The hard life in China at that time made them think that life there did not suit them, according to many respondents. This was not surprising since most, if not all, of the overseas Chinese who returned to China were from middle class or “bourgeois” background. They were not accustomed to manual labor. As a result, many tried to go out of China. And things only became worse because starting from 1964, the Cultural Revolution shut down schools and universities. The teachers and students deemed in need of reeducation were sent to the farms. Many Returned Overseas Chinese were discriminated and persecuted because of their “foreign connection.”

In facing all the cultural as well as social problems in their new place, China, the Returned Overseas Chinese had to adapt to their new environment. Adaptation refers to “the capacity to adjust to surrounding environmental conditions. It implies change. A person must change or adapt to new conditions and circumstances in order to continue functioning effectively” (Zastrow, 1994:13). In other words, the returnees had to negotiate with their new place. They had to develop the capacity to adjust to the new environment. When they arrived in China for the first time, they thought that life was very tough. They felt that the style of clothing and food of the local society were not suitable for them. After living there for quite sometime, they began to adapt to their new environment.

It seemed much easier for the returnees to adapt to the different food and clothes. But faced with alienation and other social problems, a lot of effort was needed in order to hurdle the social obstacles. The returnees who could not overcome the problems in China tried to go back to Indonesia. A few were successful, but most of them ended up in Hong Kong. The fact is once

they left Indonesia for China, they became *persona non grata*, and were denied entry back to Indonesia. This can be seen from the fact that the overseas Chinese from Indonesia constituted 90% of the overseas Chinese population in Hong Kong (Chin, 2003: 66). Those who were able to adapt continued to live in China. They survived the political and social crises. They had to be open to changes, kept their hopes and expectations in check, and tried to find the equilibrium between expectation and hope on one hand, and reality on the other hand. They showed how they adapted to the situation and survived.

Identity

Although the Returned Overseas Chinese have adapted and changed, many still feel that they are different from the local Chinese. The majority, 413 respondents, thought that they were different from the local people, and 55 of them said that they were very different. Their reasons were also varied: 218 said they had a different way of thinking, 191 referred to differences in culture and lifestyle, 59 mentioned language difference. Only 169 people thought that they were like locals. When they were interviewed, they said that the local and the overseas Chinese no longer looked different now, but the locals used to be different from the returnees. The differences, of course, were very clear before the 1970s. The respondents who said that they were different from the local people further elaborated that it was difficult to answer why the returnees were different from the locals. But they added that their experience and their way of thinking might be the cause of the difference, although now the difference was not as great as it used to be. Nevertheless, they said, they were still different. And this difference created their distinct identity.

One example of their distinct identity is language. Indonesian, which is sometimes mixed with Javanese, is often used during their social gatherings. But some respondents admitted that their Indonesian was not good. Some respondents believe that the number of returnees in the city they live in and their participation in the alumni association play a role in maintaining their Indonesian proficiency, since they have more opportunity to speak Indonesian. It seems that the use of Indonesian and other Indonesian local languages, Javanese for example, function as their identity markers and remind them that they were from Indonesia. One respondent said that although she has been living in Beijing for more than 43 years, people who are well-versed in Mandarin could trace her different (Indonesian) accent. Actually, she does not care about this, but there are times when she is asked where she comes from. Usually, they thought she is from South China. Being asked that question makes her suddenly realize that she is from Indonesia.

Another aspect that also reinforced their distinct identity was their association with the other returnees. Because of the problems they encountered, they tried to find some kind of refuge among themselves. They formed, to use Anderson's term, "imagined communities," that is, communities "distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are

imagined” (2000:6). They liked to be together with their fellow returnees. Therefore, their social interaction with the locals was limited. Goldley (2002:353) wrote that generally, the overseas Chinese preferred to be with their fellow overseas Chinese, and hence, they often married each other. Even in the mid-1950s when more integration between local and overseas Chinese occurred, it was very rare for an Indonesian Chinese to marry a local Chinese. “It was considered neither progressive nor politically wise to be too close to these foreigners” (Goldley, 2002:353). It is also interesting to see that most of the respondents, about 57.39%, married fellow returnees, mostly from Indonesia, although there were also respondents who married returnees from other countries. This could strengthen their identity as returnees.

Another interesting point is that those who believed that the returnees were different from their local counterparts mostly lived in the bigger cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Those who believed they were the same as the locals were from the relatively smaller cities such as Hangzhou and Guilin.

One important factor that marked their sense of difference is their participation in the activities of the returnees’ association. Because of their frequent association with their fellow returnees, their sense of “Indonesian-ness” remained, making them different from others. Many respondents living in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou said they participated actively in almost all the activities of the Indonesian alumni association, both formal and non-formal. These activities seemed to have a role in establishing their identity as Returned Overseas Chinese. In the smaller cities, however, the number of the returnees was not as big as that in the bigger cities. Thus, there were also fewer activities and social gatherings. Most of them mingled with the local people more frequently, so that gradually they felt that they were becoming like the locals. Nevertheless, those who admitted that they rarely participated in the activities of the returnees’ association said that they would have joined the activities if they were informed or knew about them. This proves that the returnees believe that their association is important for them, at least for maintaining the relationship among fellow returnees.

Although the returnees felt that they were in the same boat and tried to participate in the activities of the associations, they also tried to integrate into the local community. This could be seen in their efforts to join in the social activities of the local people. They also believe that the difference between the returnees and local people were getting narrower and narrower. Besides that, they also tried to integrate into the local community by establishing friendship with the locals. When they were asked who their close friends were, 50.34% answered fellow returnees, 26.64% answered local people, and 23.02% answered both fellow returnees and local people. The fact that more than 26%, plus those who answered both, had local people as their close friends showed their effort in integrating with the new society. This shows that the returnees nowadays feel a lot more comfortable with the locals. Nevertheless, more than half of the respondents said that their close friends were their fellow returnees. This also implies that there is still a strong bond among the returnees. Moreover, this also shows how they view themselves.

All the respondents defined themselves as Returned Overseas Chinese from Indonesia. They admitted that they were Chinese and also Chinese citizens, but they also said that they were returnees from Indonesia. This implies that their identities were not as simple as their local counterparts. Social identity is defined as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership” (McKinlay, 1998:46). Local Chinese could say that they are Chinese. But for the Returned Overseas Chinese from Indonesia, they are Chinese *from* Indonesia. This differentiates them from other Chinese—and this marks their social identity.

What the respondents in this study said could be seen as an indicator of how the returnees from Indonesia identify and position themselves in the society. They belong to a special kind of Chinese with an Indonesian cultural heritage. Some aspects of Indonesian culture, such as language, survive in their community. This cultural identity differentiates them from the local Chinese. Cultural identity is defined as “one shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’ ... which people with shared history and ancestry hold in common” (Hall, 1990:223). Their cultural identity is the amalgamation of Chinese and Indonesian cultural heritage.

Their opinion that their Indonesian heritage is a part of their identity can also be seen from their connection with Indonesia. All the respondents said that they still have family and relatives living in Indonesia. About 81.79% said that they have visited Indonesia. Many of them have even visited Indonesia more than twice. They also keep in touch with their Indonesian friends, especially their schoolmates. They said that they are also members of the alumni association of their school in Indonesia. Even when there was a reunion among the alumni, they said that they tried to attend the reunion party. This proves that their emotional and cultural bonds with Indonesia still remain. They also have a strong nostalgia towards their Indonesian homeland.

Nevertheless, when they were asked where they prefer to live, about 43.99% preferred to live in China, 20.96% said that they liked living in Indonesia, and the rest, 35.05%, did not answer. The same trend also occurred when respondents were asked whether they would have returned to China or stayed in Indonesia if they had a chance to choose differently. About 61.68% answered they would still return to China, while the rest, 38.32%, did not answer.

From their answers to these two questions, it can be seen that the majority still prefer to live in China and they did not want to change their minds even if they were given a chance to do so. This is despite the fact that the Indonesian government’s policy toward the Chinese is getting better. Yet, the number of respondents who did not answer is also high. Those who chose to return to China have adapted to their present conditions well and have come to terms with their present life. And for those who did not answer, there is a possibility that the two options given did not fit them, that they were not happy with what had happened to them and do not want to talk about it. But they had no other choice except to continue with their lives. As one respondent

remarked, they are not young anymore and they just want a peaceful life, so there was no point in talking about the bitter past.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the historical background as well as the context for the adaptation and negotiation of the socio cultural identities of the Indonesian Returned Overseas Chinese. Being Chinese outside China cannot possibly mean the same thing as being Chinese inside China. The people's sense of self-identity varies from place to place, molded by local circumstances where they settle and construct new ways of life. In this paradigm, one can see not one but many Chinese identities. In this context, the Indonesian overseas Chinese also brought Indonesian social and cultural influences when they returned to China. And within each member of this group lie many layers of cultural and social negotiations interacting with the development of their personal and sociocultural roles and identities. Their background and experiences also affected the way they view themselves and define their identity. They are subject to negotiation because of their different identities as Returned Overseas Chinese. For them, their identity was in the process of formation. As Stuart Hall wrote, identity is never completed—it is always in process (1991: 47).

Most of the Indonesian Overseas Chinese who returned to China in the 1950s and 1960s spent their formative years in Indonesia. Thus, they have already formed a cultural pattern that is difficult to change. These Indonesian social and cultural influences played a role in molding their Chinese-ness, which the locals considered suspicious. That is why they had serious adjustment problems when they arrived in China for the first time. While problems such as food and clothing could be easily overcome, the other problems were not as easy to solve.

All the events that happened to them influenced the way they developed their identities. Identities, as Stuart Hall wrote, “undergo constant transformation...they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” (1991:225). Although ethnically they are Chinese, they are not like local Chinese. They still identify themselves as returnees from Indonesia.

At first they thought there were big differences between the local Chinese and themselves. This strengthened their identity as Returned Overseas Chinese, an identity that is “always constructed through splitting. Splitting between that which one is, and that which is the other” (Hall, 1991:48). They have a lot in common with their fellow returnees, and their experiences during their early days in China until the Cultural Revolution made them feel they were in the same boat. And this also strengthened their identities, for as Jeffrey Weeks wrote: “Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others” (88).

Gradually, the returnees realized that their differences from the local Chinese were becoming negligible. Nevertheless, they still consider themselves as Returned Overseas Chinese. Some, especially those living in bigger cities where there is a substantial number of Returned Overseas Chinese and the alumni association is active, still believe that their differences from the local Chinese remain.

The returned Overseas Chinese from Indonesia also welcomed the Indonesian government's changing policy toward the Chinese in Indonesia. Moreover, many of them still have relatives in Indonesia. They said that the Indonesian government's changing policies towards the Chinese benefited the Indonesian government and the Chinese community there. Nevertheless, they thought they did not have to return to Indonesia. They stressed that they were Chinese citizens with an Indonesian cultural heritage. They did not want to linger in the past and to lament the bitterness they once experienced. As one respondent said, they are already old and they just want to enjoy a peaceful life in their old age.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study has several challenges, one of which is the language barrier. My low Chinese proficiency kept me from getting access to the smaller cities and villages that may also have a substantial number of overseas Chinese, especially the places where there are overseas Chinese farms. First, it would be interesting to conduct a survey on the Returned Overseas Chinese who live in the overseas Chinese farms since they might have different experiences from those living in the cities. Another idea for further research would be the role of the alumni association in preserving Indonesian heritage. My findings show that those living in the cities where the alumni associations are quite active show a stronger identity as Returned Overseas Chinese. They still see themselves as different from the local people although they have been living in China for more than 40 years.

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