

# NEGOTIATING BETWEEN IDENTITIES: INDONESIA'S CHINESE-LANGUAGE NEWSPAPERS IN THE POST-NEW ORDER ERA

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## ABSTRACT

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memberikan penggambaran identitas orang Tionghoa-Indonesia di era pasca-Orde Baru. Di bawah rezim otoriter, ekspresi publik dengan identitas Tionghoa di semua bidang sosial, seperti budaya, bahasa dan politik, ditekan secara resmi oleh pemerintah seiring dengan kebijakan asimilasi. Seseorang bisa menjadi orang Tionghoa atau orang Indonesia, tetapi tidak keduanya. Sejak runtuhnya pemerintahan Orde Baru pada tahun 1998, Indonesia telah memulai proses demokratisasi, dan identitas lama serta warisan budaya Tionghoa-Indonesia telah "dibebaskan". Sekarang ada kebutuhan mendesak untuk memeriksa kembali identitas orang Tionghoa. Satu saluran untuk mengekspresikan identitas etnis Tionghoa adalah melalui media etnis, seperti surat kabar berbahasa Mandarin - sebagaimana yang akan difokuskan oleh makalah ini. Berdasarkan konteks ini, makalah ini bertujuan untuk melihat apa identitas orang Tionghoa-Indonesia yang disajikan dalam surat kabar Indonesia berbahasa Mandarin di masa pasca-Orde Baru, dengan menganalisa pelaporan dan diskusi mereka mengenai peristiwa politik domestik yang utama.

**Keywords:** Chinese newspapers, political reporting, ethnic identity, Chinese-Indonesians, post-New Order Indonesia

## 1. Introduction

When Indonesia was under the authoritarian New Order regime between 1966 and 1998, public expression of Chinese culture, such as Chinese education, Chinese mass media and ethnic Chinese organizations, were outlawed by the government in line with a strict policy of "assimilation". Import of printed matters in Chinese languages into the country was classified as a prohibited import, which was as dangerous as narcotics and arms in customs regulations (Suryadinata, 2004). One could either be a Chinese or an Indonesian, but not both, on the ground that Chinese identity, in official discourses, was not compatible with being Indonesian, or "pribumi" (indigenous, native), and thus was an obstacle to national unity.

With the collapse of the New Order in 1998, the assimilation policy was officially ended in 2000. Indonesia entered an era of reform and democratization when the government also embraced the ideas of multiculturalism in its discourses regarding

social and political issues. A series of initiatives and policies had positive impacts to "liberate" the expression of Chinese culture and ethnic identity were promulgated. The country's fourth president, Abdurrahman Wahid, for instance, abrogated the presidential decision which banned the public celebration of Chinese festivals, and he removed the prohibition of importing and publishing printed materials in Chinese characters (Chui, 2002). Along with the "resurging" of Chinese culture since 1998, was that a large number of Chinese-language publications emerged. For example, between November 1998 and December 2000, seventeen publications, be they published in Chinese or other languages, were founded by Chinese-Indonesians. Ten of them, including four newspapers and six magazines, were in Chinese (Huang, 2001). Li Zhuo Hui, former editor-in-chief of *Guoji Ribao (International Daily)*, one of the major Chinese-language newspapers in the country, described this florescence as a period when "a hundred flowers bloom (*baihua qifang*)" (Li, 2003).

As Anthony Reid observed, after 1998, the concept of "Chineseness" appears to have

become as popular as it was unpopular under the New Order (Reid, 2009). Ethnic media, including the Chinese-language newspapers, are one of the many open channels that can present the identity of Chinese-Indonesians. Based on this context, this paper aims to look at what identity of Chinese-Indonesians that Indonesia's Chinese-language newspapers in the post-New Order era present, by analyzing their reporting and discussions about major domestic political events.

## 2. Literature Review

Ethnic media, according to Hang Yin, refers to the “media by and for ethnics in a host country with content in ethnic languages” (Yin, 2015). On the contrary, Melissa Johnson, based on her studies on the English-language and bilingual Latina magazines in the United States, is not convinced by the idea that a link with ethnic language is necessary for ethnic media. She argues that language should be omitted as a focus in the research of ethnic media, because the media can thrive without the native language (Johnson, 2000). On the other hand, she also admitted that many Latino-Americans nowadays may regard English rather than Spanish as their native language, even though they still could be bilingual.

In fact, the situation in Indonesia should be similar to the one observed by Johnson in the US. After almost three decades of forced assimilation, for many Chinese-Indonesians, especially the young generations, their native language is Bahasa Indonesia and/or a local dialect, instead of Chinese – although many of the dialects had absorbed a considerable number of elements from Chinese languages such as Hakka and Hokkien. The publication language of ethnic Chinese media, therefore, is not necessarily in Chinese languages. Even so, one should not ignore the representative role that the Chinese-language media takes as a part of the Chinese communities.

There has been a growing body of literature investigating on the relationship between the presentation of ethnic identity by ethnic media and the involvement into local politics by those media. Yin, from a general sense, argues that ethnic media have roots in the host country and fostering an identity that is embedded in the local experience (Yin, 2015). K. Viswanath and Pamela Arora notice that ethnic media have served an “assimilatory function”, by reporting more on the involvement of minorities in the host country's politics (Viswanath and Arora, 2000). Wan-Ying Lin and Hayeon Song also point out that politics is one of the most important topics in “geo-ethnic stories” of ethnic media – the stories which are culturally relevant and locally vital (Lin and Song, 2006).

Yet, the role played by Indonesia's Chinese-language newspapers in promoting the social and political integration of Chinese-Indonesians into the mainstream society is under-explored in academic research. There have been many, on the other hand, emphasizing on their role in the preservation of Chinese traditions and culture. Leo Suryadinata highlights that the newspapers, together with Chinese language education and ethnic Chinese organizations, are the “three pillars” of Chinese culture in overseas Chinese communities (Suryadinata, 2004). He goes further to describe them as the “three treasures” (*san bao*) of “Chineseness” (Hoon, 2006). In addition, Chang-Yau Hoon observed that those newspapers had become an important venue for Chinese-Indonesians, in particular, the older generations, to express their nostalgia for their Chinese roots (Hoon, 2006).

## 3. Primary Sources

This paper is based on a stage report from an archival and documentary research, discourse analysis of media, interview and participant observation, which the author

conducted in Indonesia in 2015 for a master's thesis to the Australian National University, Canberra. This fieldwork, among other research, consisted a part of a year-long project that incorporated multi-disciplines to investigate the complexity of the identity of Chinese-Indonesians in the post-New Order era.

The primary sources that the author mainly consulted in this research include Indonesia's four largest Chinese-language newspapers in the post-New Order era. Based on circulation numbers, *Guoji Ribao*, or the *International Daily*, is the largest. It first appeared in Jakarta in 2001; later also expanded to major cities such as Surabaya, Medan and Pontianak. In 2001, it circulated about 27,000 copies per day. That figure was 35,000 in 2005, and then increased to 50,000 in 2013 (Chui, 2002; Luo and Gao, 2005; Li and Guo, 2013).

The second largest newspaper is *Yindunixiya Xingzhou Ribao* (*Sin Chew-Harian Indonesia*, or *Sin Chew-Indonesia Daily*). In 2006, the established *Indonesia Daily* was acquired by one of Malaysia's leading Chinese-language media, namely *Xingzhou Ribao* (*Sin Chew Daily*), one year before it was relaunched as today's *Sin Chew-Indonesia Daily*. In this paper, the *Sin Chew-Indonesia Daily* will be abbreviated as the *Indonesia Daily*. In 2001, the *Indonesia Daily* circulated about 30,000 copies per day. The circulations dropped to 10,000 in 2005 and had remained at a similar level ever since (Chui, 2002; Luo and Gao, 2005).

*Yindunixiya Shangbao* (*Bisnis Indonesia*, or *Business Indonesia*), which was founded in Jakarta in 2000, is the third largest newspaper. In 2001, it circulated about 5,000 copies per day; the circulations almost doubled in 2005, and then dropped to be around 8,000 in 2013 (Chui, 2002; Luo and Gao, 2005; Li and Guo, 2013). The content of *Business Indonesia* focuses on

economic news and business information, among other topics.

The following one is *Qiandao Ribao* (*Harian Nusantara*, or *Archipelago Daily*), which was first published in Surabaya in 2000, and later also set up a branch office in Jakarta. This newspaper mainly circulates in East Java. In 2001, its circulations were about 2,000 to 3,000 copies every day. That figure reached its peak at 7,000, and remains around 5,000 nowadays (Chui, 2002; Luo and Gao, 2005). The newspapers listed above have circulated over a decade and gone digital by setting up their websites, which have been updated as frequently as their printed editions. Moreover, both the *International Daily* and *Archipelago Daily* also publish digital newspapers.

#### **4. An Ethnic Approach to Political Discussion**

The New Order's ban on Chinese culture left a significant legacy in shaping the post-1998 ethnic Chinese media, making a nostalgia to their Chinese roots the main feature of many Chinese newspapers. In other words, many publications only write about their ethnicity. Because of the "liberation" of expressing the Chinese identity, they feel that they are more "Chinese" than ever before. Driven by this largely victim mentality, Chinese-language newspapers apply an ethnic dimension when in the discussion of domestic politics. This angle of looking at things emphasizes the long-term victimhood of many Chinese-Indonesians in social and political life.

One typical example is the special subject writings, including different genres, that the Chinese-language newspapers published every May to mourn the May 1998 Riots of the country. The riots erupted soon after the end of the devastating 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Mass unemployment, severe inflation and a potential shortage of living necessities had severely undermined

people's confidence in the government. Public discontent to the deeply entrenched corruption and nepotism that were closely associated with President Suharto and his regime also developed to its peak. As a result, mass violence, including killings, rapes and lootings, which were targeting those who were perceived as the beneficiaries of the regime broke out across major cities, such as Jakarta, Solo and Surabaya. Many of the victims were Chinese-Indonesians, due to a widely accepted identification by the local society that they were an "ethnic class". For instance, there was a wide belief to Chinese-Indonesians that they became economically well-off by exploiting the Indonesian society (Heidhues, 2006). Charles Coppel estimated that because of fearing of the riots, more than one hundred thousand Chinese-Indonesians left for Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia to seek refuge (Coppel, 2002).

In May 2015, the major Chinese-language newspapers also published thematic writings on mourning the riots. Supplementary section of the *International Daily*, for instance, included numbers of memoirs and poems submitted by Chinese-Indonesians who were victims of the riots. These writings, all ended up with a similar tone, suggesting Chinese-Indonesian communities to learn from the past and make contributions to build a more harmonious relationship with other social and ethnic groups. One message that was not openly stated, but had explicitly delivered, was that the past was harsh yet the justice that the victims deserved had not been adequately acknowledged by the state and mainstream society. A poem which was written by a journalist and entitled "Storm in May", recollected a scene of the event, "when lootings, smashing, rapes and killings are happening, nobody out there except me immediately realized how crazy that situation was" (my translation) (Huang,

2015). A commentary on the *Indonesia Daily* went much further to condemn the Chinese communities nowadays were as forgetful as "chickens" which allowed themselves to be trampled (You, 2015). The writer urged that the Chinese should remember the past like "cows", and take the masterminds of the riots to court, or to the International War Crime Tribunal if there was a need.

It should not be denied that most criticisms made by the writers and newspapers could be based on their self-perception that they were part of responsible members of the nation and society. They pointed out the neglected facts in order to put wrongs to rights. On the other hand, however, when a minority continue to stress their history of victimhood in their relationship to the mainstream society, the minority are also demarcating themselves from the majority. It is arguably obvious that to express personal sentiments, mainly fear and anger, was also a significant purpose for those writings. As the poem had shown, the author adopted rather explicit and emotional descriptions such as "lootings", "smashing", "rapes", and "killings" – similar as the metaphors of "chickens" and "cows" in the commentary article. These sentiments are incentives of self-exclusion. Moreover, in a multi-ethnic society, in most cases, it is the majority or the dominant group, instead of the minority, possesses the position to determine the meaning of "diversity" and the scope of tolerance. In this sense, the condemnments from the commentary, for example, could be rather radical to the mainstream society, and less tolerable to certain groups within the Chinese communities.

## **5. An Non-Ethnic Approach to Political Participation**

Even though there is no sign suggesting that the Chinese-language

newspapers intend to abandon the ethnic dimension of looking at politics, there is also an emerging non-ethnic approach of political participation. The new trend indicates that the Chinese newspapers have increasingly involved in discussions of political issues that are concerning not only a segment of the Chinese communities but also wider audiences in the mainstream society.

National elections, including the presidential election and the national legislative election, are one of the most important political topics in the post-New Order era. Since 1998, the elections have taken place every five years – in 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014. By looking at the voter turnouts in each of these years, it is obvious that Indonesian public have a strong while continuous enthusiasm toward political participation. For instance, the voter turnouts in the legislative elections in those four years were 93.30, 84.09, 70.99 and 75.11 percent, respectively (Voter Turnout, 2014). Since 2004, Indonesia has made the president of the country be directly elected by the people. Voter turnouts in the last three presidential elections were 68.51 percent in 2004, 71.91 in 2009, and 69.58 in 2014. By analyzing the news reports, editorials and commentaries in the Chinese-language newspapers about the 2014 elections, this paper will illuminate the demonstration of the non-ethnic approach of political participation by the newspapers.

The legislative election took place on April 9, and the presidential election was on July 9. The Chinese-language newspapers had been following every important move concerning the elections, producing up-to-date contents on relevant issues, with various forms, as frequently as the mainstream media such as *Kompas* and the *Jakarta Post*. Even though it is difficult to track when those newspapers firstly published about electoral topics, some

relevant news reports did come out as early as in 2012. In addition to introducing regular electoral news, the newspapers, such as the *International Daily*, also integrated relevant useful information such as the timetables and address details of different political parties' electoral campaigns, as well as a systematic explanation to the working voting system, to their readers. These thematic sections were able to elaborate the information in effective ways. For instance, in order to illustrate how the current voting system functioned and how a ballot could be counted as a valid one, the *International Daily* was able to offer readers ten examples of ballots which were filled out in sixteen right and wrong ways (2014nian Daxuan, 2014).

Other newspapers had also offered their own thematic sections. Polling for the legislative election was completed on April 9. Before the official result was announced, figures from immediate quick counts had suggested that even the leading political party, that is, the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan*, or PDI-P), was not qualified to nominate its own candidate to solely represent PDI-P to contest in the upcoming presidential election. All political parties had to form a coalition with their rivals from the legislative election in order to contest in the presidential election. On the next day of the legislative polling, *Business Indonesia* immediately published a concise report, summarizing different parties' considerations regarding forming a coalition with other parties (Yihui Xuanju, 2014).

The national elections offered an opportunity for the Chinese-language newspapers to get involved in a political education of Chinese-Indonesian communities. By explaining the political knowledge such as how the electoral system works and by notifying updates on the elections to the communities, the

newspapers provided Chinese-Indonesians, especially the old, Chinese-speaking generations who had been avoiding politics for more than three decades, the information that was needed to participate in politics. More importantly, this effort could promote political awareness in those communities and to encourage them to perceive politics as a natural part of daily life. Maybe it has been too difficult to motivate the old generations to contest in an election or to actively participate in political activities. At least, they should understand the politics, as the editor-in-chief of *Business Indonesia* said (interview, 2015). To achieve these goals, Li Zhuo Hui, the former editor-in-chief of the *International Daily*, had published five books in Chinese about Indonesian politics. Editor-in-chief of *Business Indonesia* also had six books on Indonesian politics and economy. In this sense, the Chinese-Indonesian media practitioners perceive themselves as truly Chinese and truly Indonesian.

This self-perception was also demonstrated through the Chinese newspapers' support to the candidate pair Jokowi and Jusuf Kalla, over Prabowo Subianto and Hatta Rajasa, in the presidential election. It is reasonable to see that why many Chinese-Indonesians gave their support to the former candidate pair. Not just because of Jokowi's decent performance in governing Solo and Jakarta, as well as his image of being a reformist and pluralist, but also because of Prabowo was believed to be one of the masterminds of the riots took place in 1998, which Chinese-Indonesians severely suffered from, but whom was still under the protection of impunity.

In June 2014, for example, the *International Daily*, published a commentary with the title "No Blank Vote, Respect Human Rights, and Remember the History", mobilizing readers to vote for

Jokowi and Kalla (Nan, 2014). On July 4 and 5, six pages of the *Archipelago Daily* were the bilingual posters, in Mandarin Chinese and Bahasa Indonesia, campaigning for Jokowi and Kalla (*Archipelago Daily*, 2014). In fact, the publication of those posters was sponsored by Bambang D.H, senior PDI-P politician and the former deputy mayor of Surabaya. PDI-P backed Jokowi throughout the elections. Even so, as far as the author had observed, the *Archipelago Daily* had never campaigned for the other candidates during the presidential election. That is to say, its stand was arguably firm.

More importantly, the presidential election in 2014, according to many scholars, such as Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, was one of the most bitterly contested one since the collapse of the New Order (Aspinall and Mietzner, 2014). One of the black campaigns against Jokowi at that time claimed that he was ethnically Chinese and was a Christian (Editorial, 2014). A fear that another May 1998 might break out with facilitation of the supporters of Prabowo – notably paramilitary groups such as *Pemuda Pancasila* (Pancasila Youth) and *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders' Front, or FPI) – if Prabowo lost in the election spread widely among the Chinese (Setijadi, 2015). To prevent potential threats and to secure personal safety, some Chinese-Indonesians even left for other countries in the electoral period (Tneh, 2014). According to the chief editor of *Business Indonesia*, the declaration of support was a gamble, in which if the newspaper bet on a wrong side, the following consequence could be troublesome (interview, 2015). Being able to openly show political preference in this relatively intense atmosphere demonstrates that in the Chinese-language newspapers, the "Indonesian" side in defining their sense

of belonging was as important as the “Chinese” side of them.

## **6. Conclusion**

In summary, since the end of the New Order regime, the Chinese-language newspapers in Indonesia have constantly been negotiating between an ethnic and non-ethnic approach to political participation, that is, a negotiation of being Chinese and

being Indonesian. Their discussions on domestic politics were once predominantly about ethnicity-related issues. When the author was concluding the report on the fieldwork, even though there was no indication that the newspapers planned to abandon this dimension of seeing things, they had also developed a new trend, encouraging them to refer more to the local context.

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