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Book Review

Chinese Identity in Indonesia. [Review of the book *Memories of Unbelonging: Ethnic Chinese Identity Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia*, by Charlotte Setijadi]. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2023, 322 pp. Hardcover ISBN-13: 9780824894054; Paperback ISBN-13: 9780824899158.

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Charlotte Setijadi in this book examines the experiences of contemporary Chinese Indonesians who, despite having been in Indonesia for centuries, are still often regarded as outsiders. Even after enduring three decades of institutionalized pressure to assimilate during the Suharto era, they remained vulnerable to anti-Chinese violence, especially during the political turmoil of May 1998.

Setijadi, who left Indonesia at a young age for Australia, wrote that upon hearing of the May 1998 violence against the Chinese, she felt a sense of shock and grief. She wondered why, even after having changed their names to Indonesian-sounding ones and moving towards assimilation, the Chinese are still not considered as Indonesians. Could the Chinese ever be Indonesian enough, she and probably many other Chinese Indonesians, asked?

Setijadi later returned to Jakarta to conduct research for her PhD, focusing on the experiences of Chinese Indonesians, primarily in Jakarta. She interviewed members of the community to gather their recollections of the May 1998 attacks, how the events were remembered, how the collective memory of the trauma shaped their sense of identity, and whether the situation of the Chinese had changed in the post-Suharto era.

Focusing on both personal and collective memories, Setijadi situates her study within the broader context of Indonesian society. She offers valuable insights into the larger themes of ethnic identity, national belonging and the resilience of minority communities in coping with systemic exclusion. In re-thinking the narratives of integration and the enduring legacies of violence and

marginalization in Indonesia, Setijadi introduces the idea of 'unbelonging' which captures the paradox of Chinese Indonesians being an integral part of the nation's history yet still perceived as outsiders.

Although forming a mere 1.2% of Indonesia's population of 270 million in 2020 (with some scholars estimating 2 to 3%) the Chinese community is often perceived as unassimilable. This perception arises from a tendency to homogenize the Chinese population and overlooking their diverse economic statuses, religious affiliations and cultural practices. Such over-simplification ignores the existence of a significant number of low-income Chinese and the fact that the community includes Christians and Muslims. Additionally, the vast majority of the Chinese, including the acculturated peranakans, today speak fluent Bahasa Indonesia.

Portraying them negatively as a 'problem' not only reinforces the stereotyping and prejudices but deepens divisions and tensions. In such context, the Chinese see themselves as a discriminated minority while the majority view them as an unassimilable community. As perceived outsiders, the Chinese become vulnerable particularly in times of social or political instability in the country. Notably the power struggle in Jakarta that brought Suharto to power in 1966 and the social and economic unrests in 1998; both had major consequences for the position of Chinese Indonesians.

Suharto's New Order authoritarian rule beginning from 1966 capitalized on the prevailing anti-communist and anti-China atmosphere to institutionalise policies to resolve 'the Chinese problem'. Chinese Indonesians were pressured to adopt Indonesian names while Chinese-language schools and newspapers were shut down and all public displays of Chinese culture banned. These actions were aimed at suppressing visible markers of Chinese identity. Additionally, unlike the pribumi (indigenous Indonesians), Chinese Indonesians were required to carry documentation to prove their citizenship.

In May 1998, months of anti-government unrests erupted into violence and once again the Chinese community were targeted. Scores of Chinese were killed, Chinese women raped, and Chinese-owned properties looted and burnt. However, many observers believed that probably more pribumis died in the violence. To many Chinese, the anti-Chinese riots showed not only that the New Order's assimilation policies had failed but also how easily the community becomes victim in times of political instability.

The fall of President Suharto's unpopular New Order ushered in an era of expanded freedoms in Indonesia. There was freedom of speech and the press, the emergence of civil rights groups, and strong advocacy for human rights and governmental accountability. Along with these broad reforms, discriminatory regulations against Chinese were revoked, allowing the community to openly express their cultural identity. Imlek or Chinese New Year was now allowed to be publicly celebrated. Citizenship documents were no longer required, and the derogatory terms of 'Cina' and 'non-pribumi' dropped. These changes appeared to mark an acceptance of the Chinese and of

a more inclusive society.

Meanwhile China's rise has, as highlighted in Setijadi's study, expanded economic opportunities for Chinese Indonesians. Leveraging their shared language and cultural background, many Chinese Indonesians quickly established business contacts in China while some also took on a strategic role in facilitating official trade and investments between Indonesia and China.

The rise of China sparked growing interest in learning the Chinese language, particularly among Chinese Indonesians. By 2018 there were seventy trilingual schools along with 26 universities offering Chinese language programs plus numerous Mandarin tuition centres across the country.

As it turned out, however, despite the post-Suharto era reforms and the greater acceptance of public expressions of Chineseness, Chinese Indonesians has still not been able to discard the label as perpetual outsiders. From her field research in Indonesia and extensive use of literature on contemporary Chinese Indonesians, Setijadi noted that this persistent feeling of vulnerability and insecurity has led to further social segregation between the Chinese and the non-Chinese.

The absence of a comprehensive government investigation into the May 1998 violence disappointed the Chinese and accounts of the events have primarily circulated through rumours and hearsay. These accounts have profoundly shaped the collective and individual memory of Chinese Indonesians. Setijadi argued that trauma of past violence has led to a tendency among Chinese Indonesians to interpret their experiences through a lens of victimhood. The old fears, traumas and mutual prejudices between the two groups are easily reignited or renewed whenever there are episodes of violence.

This sense of vulnerability and insecurity has driven many middle-class Chinese Indonesians to settle in high-security residential areas. Setijadi examined one such enclave in Kelapa Gading, which like other exclusive communities, functions as virtual self-contained space with offices, schools, restaurants, recreational facilities, and shops. These gated neighbourhoods are equipped with multiple layers of security, including guards and modern surveillance systems strategically placed throughout the area. Residents are predominantly well-to-do Chinese Indonesians and they live in an environment that minimizes interactions with the outside community. Their children usually attend expensive private schools, largely Chinse-run, further reinforcing the separation between the Chinese and the non-Chinese Indonesians in daily life. In the long term, this trend underscores the persistence of the Chinese problem where Chinese Indonesians continue to be perceived as the unassimilable 'other' within Indonesian society.

The sense of vulnerability of the Chinese Indonesians was further highlighted by the dramatic political downfall of Ahok in 2017. Ahok's earlier meteoric rise to become governor of Jakarta, the nation's capital, had created hopes that Chinese Indonesians in the post-Suharto era were finally gaining a place in national political life. Long marginalized, Chinese Indonesians have been

striving in the post-Suharto era to establish a greater presence in the public sphere, including in civil society and political parties. They took part in elections, and several representing national parties even secured seats in provincial and national representative bodies.

Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok was the most prominent of Chinese political figures. However, Ahok's political career took a dramatic turn when he was accused by conservative Muslim groups of blasphemy. Found guilty, he served a two-year prison sentence. The massive rallies against him revealed not only deep-seated anti-Chinese sentiments but also the growing influence of ethno-nationalism and political Islam in Indonesia. These developments are likely to exacerbate the divide between Chinese and non-Chinese Indonesians.

Hence, Setijadi highlights scepticism about whether public celebration of Chineseness at the macros level has led to meaningful changes in how Chinese and non-Chinese Indonesians perceive one another at the micro level. She notes the growing influence of ethno-nationalist discourse which continues to shape ideas of national belonging and dominates political rhetoric. Indonesian assimilationists emphasize the necessity of absolute cultural and ethnic homogeneity for all citizens. As a result, ethnic and racial tensions are likely to persist, with unresolved issues of identity and belonging remaining a source of division.

Setijadi's study explores the ongoing challenges Chinese Indonesians face in demonstrating their loyalty, patriotism, and sense of belonging. For some, the rise of China as a global power complicates their sense of belonging. Meanwhile, younger Chinese Indonesians are actively working to bridge ethnic divides and expressing their aspirations for the community through innovative means such as forming online groups and through films and literature. Despite these efforts, Setijadi notes that the precarious situation of Chinese Indonesians in society remains a source of anxiety. They face two critical double binds: the need to dispel negative stereotypes of exclusivity while simultaneously protecting their in-group interests and security. No other ethnic group, with its internal diversity, has encountered such complex dilemmas or the same level of public scrutiny.

This is a well-researched and cogently argued study of the Chinese in Indonesia and a fascinating exploration into the interplay of historical trauma, collective memory and contemporary identity politics. Setijadi has raised important questions in her work and these could be extended to the study of Chinese Indonesians of other socio-economic backgrounds across different regions in Indonesia. It may be necessary also to consider the part which religious affiliation has in shaping the sense of 'belonging' of Chinese Indonesians.

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