

# Are Chinese Indonesians Part of Bangsa Indonesia? The Role of Siauw Giok Tjhan and Baperki in Indonesia's Nation-Building

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## Abstract

This paper examines the role of Siauw Giok Tjhan, chairman of Baperki (*Badan Permusyawaratan Kewarganegaraan Indonesia*), the largest Chinese Indonesian organisation before the 1965 Coup, and his advocating for equal citizenship (*kewarganegaraan*) for Chinese Indonesians. Siauw equated citizenship with nation (*kebangsaan*), using the two terms interchangeably. Siauw also advocated that Chinese Indonesians should preserve their ethnic identity. However, in 1963 when President Sukarno proposed recognising the *Peranakan Chinese* as one of Indonesia's *suku* Siauw ignored this suggestion. Even after he was released in 1978 and died in 1981, his basic understanding of Chinese Indonesian society had not changed. This paper, therefore, revisits Siauw's perspectives on the Indonesian nation and *suku*, tracing the development of his political thought and his reluctance in accepting the *Peranakan Chinese* as a *suku*. The paper also deals with the relevance of Siauw's political thoughts in contemporary discourse on Chinese Indonesian identity and integration, particularly the relevance of *Peranakan Chinese* as a *suku* in today's understanding of the Indonesian nation.

**Keywords:** Siauw Giok Tjhan, Baperki, citizenship, nationhood, Chinese Indonesian, *suku* Peranakan Chinese

## Introduction

*Siauw Giok Tjhan* (1914–1981) served as chairman of the Indonesian Citizenship Consultative Body, widely known by its Indonesian abbreviation, Baperki (Badan Permusyawaratan Kewarganegaraan Indonesia), the largest Chinese Indonesian organisation before the Suharto era. A prominent post-World War II Chinese community leader, journalist, and active participant in Indonesia's nationalist and anti-colonialist movements, Siauw was deeply influenced by Marxism. He played a significant role in Indonesia's left-wing movements, maintaining close ties with key Indonesian communist leaders and President Sukarno. Through his advocacy for equal rights for Indonesians of Chinese descent, Siauw emerged as a central figure in shaping the social position and dynamics of the Chinese Indonesian community.

Despite his significance, Siauw's perspectives on the Indonesian nation and Chinese ethnicity have often been overlooked in academic discourse. Over four decades ago, I published a study on the challenges of Chinese Indonesian politics, which briefly examined the concept of the Indonesian nation in relation to *Siauw Giok Tjhan* and Baperki.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, I was invited to present a paper in Hong Kong on the centenary of *Siauw Giok Tjhan*, which prompted me to reexamine Siauw's political ideology, particularly his concept of Indonesian nationhood. It has therefore become necessary to revisit my earlier work, reassessing its accuracy and relevance in light of subsequent information about Siauw (Suryadinata, 1978). To fully understand his vision of the Indonesian nation, his ideas and activism must be situated within the broader historical and political developments of the period, as well as his complex relationships with various political parties and figures. This article, accordingly, seeks to revisit Siauw's perspectives on the Indonesian nation, tracing the development of his political thought and assessing its relevance to contemporary debates on Chinese Indonesian identity and integration.

To understand Siauw's influence, it is essential to first consider the position of the ethnic Chinese community during the 1950s and early 1960s, the period of his political activity. At the time, the ethnic Chinese community—who made up approximately 2% to 2.5% of the Indonesian population—were often perceived as an “alien” minority with disproportionate economic strength. Their significant role in distributive and retail trade, particularly in rural areas, made them frequent targets of economic discrimination. Anti-Chinese sentiment was further fueled by indigenous economic nationalists such as Assaat, who, in 1956, led a movement to promote preferential economic treatment for *pribumi* Indonesians, to the exclusion of ethnic Chinese citizens. The peak of this movement came with Presidential Regulation No. 10 in 1959, which banned “foreigners” (i.e., Chinese) from conducting retail trade in rural areas. The regulation caused widespread hardship and prompted an exodus of ethnic Chinese. Yet some leftist figures—notably the writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer—publicly defended Chinese traders, recognizing their contributions to Indonesia's economy and society.

Beyond economic issues, the ethnic Chinese were also regarded as culturally distinct and insufficiently integrated into Indonesian society, and were not fully accepted as part of the Indonesian nation. In response, Chinese Indonesians adopted different strategies. Some advocated patriotic participation in Indonesian national development, aligning themselves with progressive movements and embracing socialism while also maintaining their Chinese ethnic identity. Others pushed for complete assimilation into indigenous society, believing this was the only path to national acceptance. Since the Indonesian nation comprises a range of indigenous ethnic groups (*suku* or *suku bangsa*), the expectation was that the ethnic Chinese should assimilate into whichever *suku* existed in the regions where they resided.

Against this backdrop, Chinese Indonesians have grappled with multidimensional challenges—not only economic exclusion but also the broader questions of nation-building and integration. This paper, therefore, explores these issues through the political thought of *Siauw Giok Tjhan* and the role of Baperki.

### **Siauw Giok Tjhan's Early Life**

Siauw's formative years played a crucial role in shaping his political views. Educated in the Dutch system, he lacked proficiency in the Chinese language, which distinguished him from many within the Chinese Indonesian community. His early career in journalism, however, brought him into close contact with Chinese Indonesian politics and activism. As a young journalist, Siauw worked for a newspaper affiliated with the Chinese Peranakan community, where he came under the influence of two prominent figures: Lim Koen Hian, leader of the Chinese Indonesian Party (*Partai Tionghoa Indonesia*, PTI), and Kwee Hing Tjiat, the Editor-in-Chief of *Matahari Daily*. Lim Koen Hian, a notable leftist, initially championed Chinese nationalism but later became a strong advocate for Indonesian independence. (Suryadinata, 2015) In 1937, he joined the Gerindo (Indonesian People's Movement), led by Amir Syarifuddin, who would later become a member of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Similarly, Kwee Hing Tjiat, who initially supported Chinese nationalist ideas, founded a newspaper dedicated to promoting Indonesian nationalism upon returning to Indonesia in 1934. (Suryadinata, 2015)

### ***Siauw Giok Tjhan and Harian Rakyat***

Siauw's intellectual and political circle grew larger as he came into contact with various left-leaning Chinese and indigenous figures. These included the Editor-in-Chief of *Sin Tit Po*, members of the Chinese Indonesian Party such as Tjoa Sik Ien and Tan Ling Djie, and veteran Indonesian communists like Amir Syarifudin, Muso, and Njoto, the then-leader of PKI. Among them, Tan Ling Djie exerted the most profound influence on Siauw's intellectual development (Siauw,

1999). Tan Ling Djie (1904–1969), ten years Siauww’s senior, became his political mentor in the 1930s. Under Tan’s guidance, Siauww deepened his understanding of politics and society, and their relationship grew so close that, from 1951 to 1965, Tan lived in Siauww’s home; Siauww’s children affectionately called him “*Empek*” (uncle). (Siauww, 1999)

In 1946, both Tan and Siauww joined the Socialist Party (Partai Sosialis), marking their formal entry into political life. They were also active in the Indonesian People’s Democratic Front (FDR), a leftist political force during the revolution. In 1948, Tan joined the PKI, while Siauww remained in the FDR. The events surrounding the Madiun Affair in 1948 led to the arrest of both men, though they were soon released. After his release, Tan served briefly as Deputy Secretary General of the PKI (1948–1951), while Siauww became the director (*direktur*) of *Harian Rakjat*, the PKI’s official newspaper, from July 1951 to October 30, 1953.

In January 1951, the internal dynamics of the PKI began to shift dramatically when D. N. Aidit removed Tan from his position as Deputy Secretary General. Although Tan remained a member of the Central Committee (Hindley, 1964), his influence within the PKI had diminished. By October 1953, criticisms of Tan intensified, culminating in his expulsion from the Central Committee.<sup>2</sup> Shortly thereafter, Siauww resigned from his position as director of *Harian Rakjat*, and he was succeeded by Naibaho. Ruth McVey commented that *Siauww Giok Tjhan* was Tan Ling Djie’s good friend. It was unclear whether he left *Harian Rakjat* in protest against what Tan Ling Djie was going through, or as a result of the PKI’s decision to reduce the number of Chinese from prominent positions in the Indonesian communist movement. The latter possibility remains, which means that the new leadership of the PKI had a strong nationalist (—more appropriately, racist—writer) attitude (McVey, 1969).

McVey also observed that the PKI in Aidit’s time did not encourage Chinese Indonesians to join PKI (McVey, 1969). This “new change” in the party’s approach led to Siauww’s growing antipathy towards Aidit, and their relationship eventually deteriorated. Nevertheless, Siauww maintained strong ties with other prominent PKI figures, particularly Njoto. Indeed, when Siauww served as director of *Harian Rakjat*, Njoto was already part of the newspaper’s editorial team.

Siauww Tiong Djin, son of Siauww Giok Tjhan, mentioned in his Indonesian-language writings that during his father’s involvement in the Socialist Party and his leadership of *Suara Ibu Kota* in Yogyakarta, he received support from young PKI leaders, including Aidit and Njoto. Tiong Djin further noted that Njoto, who was ten years younger than Siauww, benefitted from Siauww’s guidance in the field of journalism (Siauww, 1999).

There are two perspectives on Siauww’s relationship with *Harian Rakjat* during the period 1951–1953. The prevailing view holds that *Harian Rakjat* was a PKI-affiliated newspaper from its inception, with Njoto effectively serving as its leading figure (McVey, 1969). However, other scholars argue that the newspaper became a PKI organ only after Siauww’s departure. (Siauww, 1999; Coppel,

2012). A review of the editorials and announcements published immediately after Siauw's departure suggests that the newspaper did not deny its ties to the PKI during Siauw's tenure as director. For instance, one editorial referred to *Harian Rakjat* as "Our Daily", stating:

"Our daily has devoted itself to the people and their struggle for more than two years. In the conflict between national interests and colonial interests, our daily has always sided with national interests. In the conflict between the people and the enemies of the people, our daily has always sided with the people" (*Harian Rakjat*, 2 November, 1953).

The editorial continued:

"From today [2 November 1953], our daily has undergone a renewal. There have been changes in the company's leadership and in the editorial board. These changes have no other purpose than improvements and refinements" (*Harian Rakjat*, 2 November, 1953).

Moreover, in an announcement concerning his "voluntary resignation," Siauw stated that Bung (brother) Naibaho has been appointed the new General Chairman of N.V. "Rakjat Printers" (*Harian Rakjat*, 30 October 1953) and urged readers to support the new leadership so that *Harian Rakjat* might continue to advance and serve as a proud instrument in the struggle for true democracy (*Harian Rakjat*, 30 October 1953).

The question of whether Siauw was a member of the PKI has generated considerable debate. While some argue that he was not formally a member (Siauw, 1999), his close relationship with the PKI leadership is undeniable. From the outset, Siauw was influenced by Marxist thought. A key factor shaping his understanding of the nation was his active involvement in Indonesia's nationalist struggle against colonialism. From the early days of the Second World War, he participated in the independence movement, fighting alongside indigenous Indonesians, gaining their respect and forging close ties with Indonesian nationalist groups. It is, therefore, not surprising, that during the revolution, he became a member of the Central Indonesian National Committee (KNIP, *Komite Nasional Indonesia Pusat*) and was appointed State Minister for *Peranakan* Affairs (*Urusan Peranakan*) in Amir Syarifudin's cabinet in 1947-1948.<sup>3</sup> This appointment likely aimed to secure the support of the *Peranakan* communities, particularly the Chinese, who were numerically significant and held considerable economic power.

At this juncture, it is imperative to briefly define the term *Peranakan*. The term originally referred to the offspring of unions between local Malay (Indonesian) and foreigners, the Malay (In-

donesian) usually female. During the colonial period, various *Peranakan* groups emerged, including Peranakan Dutch or European, Peranakan Arab and, Peranakan Chinese. These *Peranakans* spoke local languages and were locally oriented. The largest among them was the *Peranakan Chinese* community. Over time, the term *Peranakan* came to be used more specifically to refer to locally born, Malay/Indonesian-speaking Chinese population in the Indonesian archipelago, distinguishing them from foreign-born, Chinese-speaking migrants who remained culturally and politically China-oriented. While the *Peranakan Chinese* held a strong economic position in earlier periods, their dominance began to be challenged in the 1940s, especially after World War II, by newer Chinese migrants commonly referred to as Totok Chinese.

### ***Siauw Giok Tjhan and Baperki***

In March 1954, following his resignation as Director of *Harian Rakjat*, *Siauw Giok Tjhan* became Chairman of the Indonesian Citizenship Consultative Body (Baperki).

### **The Chinese Indonesian Democratic Party (PDTI)**

Baperki's origins can be traced to the Chinese Indonesian Democratic Party (PDTI), which itself grew out of the Chinese Union (*Persatuan Tionghoa*) in 1948. The Chinese Union, led by Thio Thiam Tjong, a Dutch-educated Chinese businessman, sought to represent the interests of the Chinese community in Indonesia. Following the Dutch transfer of sovereignty, the organization evolved into the PDTI. However, the PDTI soon faced internal divisions. Many members criticized the party's exclusivist stance, as it admitted only Chinese individuals, fearing that such exclusivity risked intensifying indigenous hostility toward the Chinese community. Others, however, argued that the Chinese needed a separate organization to safeguard their rights and interests, cautioning that membership in indigenous political parties would subordinate their concerns to those of the majority. These disagreements eventually led many PDTI members to leave and join indigenous parties, such as the Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI), the Christian Party, and the Socialist Party.

During this period, the issue of citizenship emerged as the most pressing concern for the Chinese community. The Indonesian government was drafting a Citizenship Bill (RUU) that would revoke the citizenship of individuals of Chinese descent, requiring them to reapply for citizenship. Had this bill been enacted by the end of 1955, many Peranakan Chinese, already Indonesian citizens, would have been forced to choose citizenship once more. Given that many were unfamiliar with legal procedures, this revocation threatened to drastically reduce the number of Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent. Recognising the urgency, several Chinese parliamentarians and associations outside of parliament felt compelled to take immediate action.

In response, the PDTI initiated efforts to unite various Chinese organisations under a new sin-

gle body. This culminated in the establishment of the *Badan Permusjawaratan Turunan Tionghoa* (Baperwatt), or Chinese Descent Consultative Body, in 1953. The preparatory committee invited representatives from all Chinese organisations, regardless of political or religious affiliations, to a grand meeting. The event reflected the broad political spectrum of Chinese Indonesians, with attendees ranging from leftists to centrists to rightists. The majority were *Peranakan Chinese* elites who hoped that the new organisation would advocate for the rights and interests of the *Peranakan* communities in Indonesia.

It is worth noting that in November 1953, Siauw published a paper condemning racism, arguing that Chinese descendants (*Turunan Tionghoa*) were treated unfairly compared to indigenous minority ethnic groups. (Siauw, 1963) He criticised the Indonesian government's "indigenous policy" (*Politik Asli*), implemented in the 1950s, that favoured "native Indonesians" by granting them privileges in both the economic and educational fields. Under this policy, companies owned by Chinese descendants with less than 50% indigenous ownership would not be recognised as "national companies". Siauw contended that this policy violated the principle of legal equality for all citizens and would ultimately be detrimental to Indonesia's national interest. (Siauw, 1953). He further argued that the "indigenous policy" would only encourage monopolies controlled by Western colonialist companies, reducing native Indonesians to mere puppets while consolidating economic control in foreign hands. The policy also restricted educational opportunities for the younger generation of *Peranakan Chinese*. In conclusion, Siauw called for the abolition of "indigenous policy" and the equal treatment of all Indonesian citizens. (Siauw, 1953)

### The Origins of Baperki

The grand meeting to establish a new organisation was chaired by Thio Thiam Tjong, the chairman of the PDTI, who explained that the PDTI had failed in its mission precisely because it had promoted racial exclusivity, as it only accepted Chinese members and prohibited them from joining other political parties. Thio stressed that the new organisation would reject such exclusivity. Oei Tjoe Tat, a noted legal scholar who drafted the organisation's constitution, further clarified that it would not function as a political party nor be aligned with any specific political ideology.

Before the organisation was formally established, however, a heated debate arose over whether the word "Chinese" should appear in its name. One group, led by Yap Thiam Hien, a prominent Chinese Christian legal scholar, argued for retaining the name "Chinese-descent Consultative Body." Yap maintained that the Chinese would be treated as Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent, and as long as there are racist views and racial discrimination, they must defend their "Chineseness." Standing in opposition was Siauw Giok Tjhan, who argued against including "Chinese" in the name. He insisted that the organisation should not confine itself to citizens of Chinese descent but should include other ethnic groups who shared its broader objectives. Siauw empha-



sised that the central task was to combat racism and discrimination in Indonesia, and retaining the term “Chinese” would only reinforce perceptions of exclusivity. The most pressing need, he argued, was to unite all Indonesians, regardless of ethnic background, and be committed to securing equal citizenship rights for all.

Yap, however, disagreed, insisting that the organisation required a clear identity, and that its name should explicitly reflect the community sought to protect. Despite his firm stance, the majority of the attendees sided with Siauw, and the meeting resolved not to include “Chinese” in the organisation’s name. The organisation was ultimately established as the *Badan Permusjawaratan Kewarganegaraan Indonesia* (Indonesian Citizenship Consultative Body), abbreviated as Baperki.

Baperki’s objectives, set out at its founding on 13 March, were as follows:

1. Fight for the implementation of national ideas, i.e. , to make every citizen a true citizen of the Republic of Indonesia;
2. Fight for the implementation of democratic principles and human rights;
3. Strive for the establishment of equal rights and obligations and to create opportunities for improvement for every citizen, regardless of descent, culture, customs, or religion.

(*Anggaran Dasar Baperki*, p. 11)

Baperki’s first major political event was its participation in the 1955 General Elections, marking a significant step in its political engagement. Initially, Baperki board members supported this move, but as the elections approached, several right-leaning figures within Baperki, such as Auwyang Peng Koen (later known as P. K. Ojong) and Khoe Woen Sioe, resigned in protest against Siauw’s political direction and left the organisation. These individuals would later emerge as Baperki’s opponents during the election campaign. In the 1955 election, only two Chinese candidates secured seats in the House of Representatives (DPR): Siauw, representing Baperki, and Tjoe Tik Tjoen of the PKI. At that time, nine seats were allocated to the Chinese minority in the DPR, leaving seven seats unfilled. The political parties that had secured representation in the DPR were subsequently permitted to appoint Chinese members to occupy these remaining seats.

### **Siauw Giok Tjhan’s Concept of the Indonesian Nation**

Upon reviewing the materials from Baperki’s founding, it becomes clear that the organisation initially conflated citizenship with nationhood, treating Indonesian citizenship as equivalent to membership in the Indonesian nation. In 1957, Baperki convened a symposium titled “What Contribution Can Indonesian Citizens of Foreign Descent (*Warganegara Indonesia Keturunan Asing*) Make to the Development of Indonesian National Culture?” The event brought together Indonesians of diverse descents, including indigenous Indonesians, Chinese, European (Indo), and Arabs.



Members from different groups, such as Njoto and Buyung Saleh of the PKI, presented papers, and Siauw delivered an extensive speech discussing the relationship between Indonesian citizenship and national identity.

Siauw began by emphasising that a key condition for building a harmonious “nation/*bangsa*” was “the existence of a strong desire to live together.” He used both the English term “nation” and the Indonesian term “*bangsa*” interchangeably, suggesting that the concept of “nation/*bangsa*” was still evolving in Indonesia and perhaps influenced by external intellectual tradition. Siauw argued that ethnic groups (*suku-suku bangsa*), including those of foreign descent (*keturunan asing*), must have a strong commitment to living together within one polity in order to become a nation. For Siauw, achieving national harmony required dismantling mutual suspicion among ethnic groups and ensuring equal opportunities for all, including those of foreign descent, to flourish. At this time, Siauw’s argument for recognising “foreign descendants as an Indonesian ethnic group” had not yet been influenced by Marxist thought. His notion of a “common desire to live together” was not grounded in Marxist or Stalinist ideology. After briefly discussing the concept of “nation,” Siauw shifted focus to the status of “Indonesian citizens of foreign descent,” equating “Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent” with “Chinese descendants as an ethnic group.” This implied that once Chinese descendants became “Indonesian citizens,” they were automatically regarded as members of the Indonesian nation.

The Baperki leadership at that time did not seem to recognise the distinction between “nation,” which pertains to cultural identity, and “citizen,” a legal term. The 1954 Baperki Constitution made no reference to ethnic Chinese as part of Indonesia’s *suku* (ethnic group); instead, it centred its attention on the rights of Indonesian citizens. Prior to 1959, Siauw himself had not fully articulated the position of ethnic Chinese within the Indonesian nation. Initially, he described Chinese descendants as a group (*golongan*). In 1957, Siauw stated that Chinese descendants (using the term *keturunan Tionghoa*, not *Peranakan Tionghoa*) were one of the “*suku* of foreign descendants” and should be treated equally with other indigenous Indonesian *suku*. He further emphasised that Chinese descendants should be recognised as “genuine Indonesian citizens” (*Warganegara Indonesia Sedjati*).

However, Siauw did not explain how Chinese descendants could integrate into Indonesian society. His primary focus, alongside that of Baperki, was on the concept of “Indonesian citizenship,” arguing that once Chinese descendants became Indonesian citizens, they automatically became part of the Indonesian nation, rendering further integration into indigenous society unnecessary. This understanding likely explains why Baperki did not articulate any concept of integration during this period. The idea of integration only emerged after 1959 in response to the notion of assimilation advanced by Baperki’s opponents, who argued for the complete assimilation of Chinese descendants into indigenous Indonesian society. In contrast, Baperki rejected the idea of “total assimilation” and

instead advocated for “integration.” The distinction between these two concepts will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

### **Siauw Giok Tjhan, Yap Thiam Hien and Assimilation Theory after 1959**

To understand the evolution of *Siauw Giok Tjhan* and Baperki’s views on the Indonesian nation, it is necessary to first consider Indonesia’s political development between 1949 and 1959. In late 1949, the Dutch and Indonesian governments signed the Round Table Conference Agreement (KMB), which established a federal system as part of the settlement. Although the Netherlands transferred sovereignty to the newly formed United States of Indonesia (RIS), the federation proved short-lived. A rebellion broke out in South Maluku, with separatists declaring independence. The central government responded with military force and ultimately defeated the rebellion. In the aftermath, the government unilaterally dismantled the federal structure and established a unitary state, ushering in what would later be known as the Parliamentary Democracy period (1950–1958).

During this period, the government announced that legislative elections would be held in 1955, resulting in the emergence of four major parties: PNI, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Masyumi, and PKI. The political landscape, however, remained unstable, marked by frequent changes of cabinet governments and growing regional unrest. In an attempt to restore stability, President Sukarno formed a new cabinet, yet instability persisted. In 1959, he dissolved Masyumi and the Socialist Party of Indonesia (PSI) due to their involvement in regional rebellions. That same year, Sukarno reinstated the 1945 Constitution, centralising power in the presidency and inaugurating the era of “Guided Democracy” (1959–1965).

Under this system, Sukarno emerged as the central figure, while both the Army and the PKI expanded their political influence. Sukarno served as a balancing force between the two, supporting the PKI when the Army appeared dominant and siding with the Army when the PKI’s influence grew. Over time, Sukarno shifted further to the left, aligning increasingly with the PKI. During the “Guided Democracy” era, Baperki enjoyed support from both the PKI and Sukarno. However, it faced staunch opposition from right-leaning parties and the Army, which rallied around the assimilationist cause. These groups, comprising anti-Communist intellectuals and the military, eventually formed the Institute for Promoting National Unity (LPKB), a direct rival to Baperki. LPKB advocated the assimilation of the Chinese community into Indonesian society, urging Chinese Indonesians to change their names and intermarry in order to be fully absorbed as “native” Indonesians.

Before examining the concept of assimilation and the establishment of LPKB, it is essential to consider the views of one of the most vocal critics, Yap Thiam Hien (1913–1989). In 1959, Yap and Siauw jointly led Baperki, but their sharply diverging political ideologies soon created growing tension. While Siauw was inclined towards socialism and communism, Yap, a committed

anti-communist Christian, rejected such orientations outright. The ideological divide between the two eventually resulted in Yap's resignation from Baperki's leadership council, although he continued to participate actively in the organisation. In 1960, Yap published three influential articles in *Star Weekly*, a leading intellectual magazine of the period, in which he outlined three approaches—or “therapies”—to address the dilemmas confronting the Chinese in Indonesia: Communist Therapy (or *Siauw Giok Tjhan Therapy*), Ten People Therapy, and his own proposed solution, Yap's Therapy.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Siauw Giok Tjhan Therapy***

Yap began by examining Siauw Giok Tjhan's proposal, which he referred to as “Siauw's therapy.” Based on his reading of Siauw's writings and speeches from 1957 to March 1960, Yap concluded that Siauw viewed Indonesian society as still being burdened by feudal, colonial, and capitalist structures. With this framework, Siauw identified several social “ulcers,” with racism being one of the most urgent issues. Although Siauw argued that “integration” could help preserve the Chinese minority's identity, he contended that it would merely prevent these societal “ulcers” from worsening. As such, for Siauw, the only viable remedy was a fundamental transformation of society—a “major operation.” Politically, this entailed dismantling feudal, colonial, and capitalist systems and replacing them with a new social order free from such structures, one in which racial tensions would be resolved and the Chinese minority would no longer suffer discrimination (Siauw, 1960a).

Yap, however, interpreted Siauw's proposal as an argument for establishing a communist society in Indonesia and questioned both its feasibility and its timeline. He pointed out that 94% of Indonesia's population was Muslim and Christian, both of which held deep-seated resistance to communism. Although Yap acknowledged the growing influence of the PKI, he argued that even if Indonesia were to move towards a communist society, such a transformation would require “a very long time.” He also criticised Siauw for failing to define clearly what “integration” meant within the framework of his proposals. While Yap conceded Siauw's ideas contained positive elements, he maintained that they would not address the issues faced by minorities in the near future. For Yap, embracing “Siauw therapy” meant simultaneously striving to eliminate racism while building a communist society—an outcome he believed was unrealistic in the Indonesian context (Yap, 1960a).

Siauw Giok Tjhan rejected Yap's interpretation in a response published in *Star Weekly*, clarifying that his aim was to help build a “Just and Prosperous Society,” a concept central to President Sukarno's revolutionary vision and intended to end human oppression (Siauw, 1960b). He referred specifically to Sukarno's August 17, 1959 speech, “Rediscovery of the Indonesian Revolution,” which later became the Political Manifesto (Manipol) of the Republic of Indonesia and was ratified

by the Supreme Advisory Council (DPA). Contrary to Yap's reading, Siauw firmly insisted that his proposal did not seek the establishment of a "communist society." Instead, he argued that what he proposed was a "Socialist Society ala Indonesia," as defined by Sukarno. Yet, Siauw did not elaborate on how this "Indonesian-style socialist society" differed from a communist society. While Siauw acknowledged that his ideas were inspired by models from the Soviet Union and China, he did not explain how these "Socialist Societies" differed from the "Socialist Society ala Indonesia" that he envisioned. Nevertheless, Siauw's rebuttal made it clear that he in fact rejected the label of "communist therapy" for his proposed concept.

Addressing Yap's concerns about the lengthy timeline for societal transformation, Siauw countered that the "Just and Prosperous Society" envisioned by Sukarno could, in fact, be achieved in the near future. He argued that "the contradictions described by brother Yap only existed in his mind," insisting that the broader non-communist Indonesian community—represented by members of the DPA from diverse political backgrounds—did not oppose the "Just and Prosperous Society" outlined in the Manipol. Siauw further asserted that no social scientists have ever denied that the settlement of minorities in the Soviet Union and China was an ideal one, a fact supported by a few anti-Communist American scholars have, though he did not provide specific names (Siauw, 1960b). He also noted that the Baperki congress had formally endorsed his proposal for realising a "Just and Prosperous Society."

However, reality proved otherwise. While Siauw was confident that the revolutionary forces supporting Sukarno were gaining momentum, leading him to believe that an "Indonesian-style socialist society" could emerge far sooner than Yap Thiam Hien had predicted, he miscalculated the momentum of the revolutionary forces and the resilience of anti-communist and anti-socialist elements within Indonesian society. Right-wing factions within the TNI, along with major religious organisations, proved far more powerful and deeply rooted than Siauw had anticipated. Furthermore, the models Siauw cited as illustrations of ideal societies that had resolved ethnic and racial issues were, in hindsight, deeply problematic. In the Soviet Union, ethnic and racial tensions ultimately contributed to the state's collapse, while in China, ethnic and racial issues have remained unresolved to this day.

### **Yap Thiam Hien Therapy**

In contrast to what he termed Siauw's "Communist Therapy", Yap offered an alternative that he considered far more practical. For Yap, the core issue lay in the relationship between the majority and minority—a structure shaped during the Dutch colonial era and inherited by independent Indonesia (Yap, 1960b). This historical legacy, according to Yap, perpetuated racism against the Chinese minority. As long as this majority-minority relationship remained distorted, the "Chinese problem" would persist. Yap believed that even assimilation would fail to resolve the underlying tensions. He

pointed to the pervasive anti-foreign sentiment in Indonesia, particularly the racial discrimination directed at the Chinese, and argued that symbolic measures, such as changing names, would never satisfy those who propagated racism. He argued that it would be naïve to think that changing the name is a positive step towards the process of unity. Furthermore, the process of assimilation/integration of the Chinese minority into the indigenous majority was not a *sine qua non* for national unity. It depended on other more complex factors (Yap, 1967).

Although Yap did not elaborate at great length, he proposed a solution that approached the issue of minorities as part of a larger humanitarian concern. He pleaded that the principles that govern Indonesian social and national life, namely Pantjasila Democracy, have to be recognised, such as human rights and the rule of law and above all “the rules of God’s will (Yap, 1967).

Yap also rejected approaches such as “brain-washing” or “changing the structure of society.” Instead, he advocated what he called a “cleansing of the heart,” which involved eliminating materialism and grounding social relations in humanity, in line with Christian teachings. According to Yap, once this Christian path was embraced, suspicion, selfishness, and hypocrisy between ethnic groups would diminish, and a spirit of service would emerge among the ruling majority. This Christian “therapy” was further reflected in Yap’s later writings. In 1967, he appealed to Indonesians, particularly Indonesian Christians, urging them to understand and respect the feelings and cultures of other nations (Yap, 1967). He also stressed the need for a just legal order, arguing that laws must apply equally to all *sukus* in Indonesia, and that legal sanctions should be imposed for any violations.

From the description above, it becomes clear that Yap’s proposals were not fundamentally different from those of Siauw Giok Tjhan. However, Yap placed greater emphasis on legal status (as Indonesian citizens) rather than cultural belonging (as part of the Indonesian nation). After 1959, the conflict between Yap and Siauw deepened, particularly over Siauw’s support for reinstating the 1945 Constitution (UUD-45) as the State Constitution. UUD-45 includes an article stating that the President must be an “Indigenous Indonesian.” For Yap, the principle behind this was crucial, while for Siauw, political realities took precedence. Baperki depended on President Sukarno’s protection, and UUD-45 reinforced Sukarno’s position, which explains why Siauw supported it. Beyond these disagreements, ideological differences further widened the gap between them. Siauw increasingly leaned to the left, while Yap struggled to gain widespread support within Baperki. Over time, Yap’s influence diminished, and he was ultimately reduced to the status of an ordinary member.<sup>5</sup>

### Ten People Therapy

Lastly, Yap addressed the views expressed by ten *Peranakan Chinese* scholars in the early 1960s, who strongly advocated for the assimilation of the Chinese into the indigenous population. They argued that assimilation was the only solution to the “Chinese problem.” According to these

“public intellectuals,” Chinese Indonesians should not form ethnic organisations or isolate themselves but should fully integrate into Indonesian society. The first step, they proposed, was to dissolve Chinese organisations, change names, encourage intermarriage, and ultimately become part of the broader Indonesian community.<sup>6</sup>

In 1961, another group of right-leaning Chinese Christians issued the Assimilation Manifesto, pledging to become “True Indonesian Patriots” (*Patriot Indonesia Sedjati*) in alignment with the ideals of the 1928 “Youth Oath”—One Nation, One Homeland and One Language (Piagam Asimilasi 1961). They argued that for Indonesian Chinese to achieve full integration, they must blend with the indigenous Indonesians, ensuring that Chinese descendants no longer remained a separate group. The manifesto also called on the majority population to recognise this “objective reality” and to support the assimilation process (Piagam Asimilasi, 1961). One spokesperson for the group, Junus Jahja (born Lauw Chuan Tho), an economist educated in Rotterdam, argued that as long as the Chinese maintained a distinct “social position in society,” they would remain targets of racism (Lauwchuantho, 1960). He therefore proposed “assimilation therapy” as a means to eradicate racial discrimination (Lauwchuantho, 1960). Ong Hok Ham, a young scholar influenced by Javanese culture, presented a more concrete proposal. He stated that the Chinese community’s tendency to remain aloof often perpetuated exclusive collective characteristics. His arguments were that

“There were few obstacles faced by the majority in Indonesia, but the greatest difficulties few found among the minorities. Obstacles related to religion were insignificant and prejudices based on skin colour and racial features were almost non-existent. Other obstacles, such as customs and prohibitions on some illicit foods, were becoming less and less pronounced in the cities were no longer significant barriers” (Onghokham, 1960).

Ong further noted that the greatest obstacle for minority communities to integrate was their lack of orientation towards Indonesia. He attributed this mindset to the colonial era when the colonial government gave the impression that the improvement of the Chinese community’s position could only come from China. He argued that this view should be abandoned because it no longer aligned with the time (Onghokham, 1960).

Ong also proposed that the government establish mixed-nationality schools and encourage Chinese descendants to adopt Indonesian names. He argued that unity could only be achieved through assimilation, which would eliminate the exclusivity of the Chinese community. In his vision, Chinese descendants would fully integrate with the majority population, participate in interethnic marriages and contribute to a more inclusive society. Ong confidently asserted assimilation could be achieved biologically, economically, sociologically, politically and through other means.

Despite their advocacy, the ideas promoted by Ong Hok Ham and other “assimilators” during this period remained somewhat ambiguous. While they championed assimilation, they did not

specify whether Chinese minorities should first assimilate into indigenous ethnic groups before fully merging into the broader Indonesian nation. They also overlooked the realities faced by Chinese communities in regions with strong Islamic influences or in areas where Chinese populations lived in isolation or formed the majority. The “assimilators,” mostly based in urban areas where tensions between the Chinese and the local population were less pronounced, lacked a clear framework for implementing assimilation in regions marked by more pronounced resistance. Without a concrete, actionable plan, their proposals lacked the practical foundation necessary for widespread implementation. Nevertheless, their ideas gained traction within the government, leading to the formation of the “National Unity Development Institute” (LPKB), an organisation affiliated with the Indonesian Intelligence Agency.

### ***Siauw Giok Tjhan and Baperki during the Sukarno Era***

After 1960, Indonesian politics veered increasingly to the left, with leftist forces gaining significant momentum. During this period, Indonesia's relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) strengthened, and foreign scholars have referred to 1959–1965 as the era of the “Jakarta-Hanoi-Beijing Axis”. Supported by the PKI and other leftist factions, Sukarno pushed for a “revolution” aimed at realising “socialism.” Siauw Giok Tjhan's writings and speeches during this period closely aligned with Sukarno's agenda. Prior to 1957, Siauw did not explicitly invoke Lenin's or Stalin's theories in formulating his vision for the Indonesian nation. After 1959, his leftward shift became more pronounced, influenced by two factors: Baperki's growing dependence on Sukarno and the PKI, and Siauw's increasing engagement with Marxist-Leninist thought.

In 1962, Siauw presented his definition of the Indonesian nation, arguing that its formation was the result of several factors:

1. Similarity of regions: Due to colonialism, the Dutch united the Indonesian archipelago using armed forces.
2. Common economic life: Dutch imperialism had created economic integration through the development of transportation infrastructure throughout Indonesia.
3. Linguistic unity: The Youth Pledge of October 28, 1928, established Indonesian as a unifying language throughout Indonesia.
4. Psychological similarity: The emergence of a common national culture, particularly after the Youth Pledge in 1928.<sup>7</sup>

These four characteristics were directly influenced by Stalin's works. In *Marxism and the Problem of the Nation*, Stalin defined the nation as a group of people who in history have had lan-



guage similarities, territorial similarities, economic life similarities and are manifested by cultural similarities in stable common life with psychological similarities” (Minzu Cidian, 1984)

Before Stalin, Marx, Engels and Lenin had also written about the nation, generally emphasising three essential elements “language similarity, regional similarity and common economic relations” (Minzu Cidian, 1984). Siauw clearly built upon Stalin’s theory in articulating his own idea of the Indonesian nation.

By 1963, Indonesia’s political landscape had become increasingly favourable to leftist forces. Sukarno, now more closely aligned with the left, adopted a rhetoric centered on “revolution” and “socialism,” which became his defining mantra. The political scene was sharply divided between two camps: the “Revolutionary Forces” and the “Reactionary Forces”—those who supported socialism and those who opposed it. Sukarno urged all Indonesian organisations to undergo *Nasakomisasi* (Nasakomisation), meaning that each organisation had to embody Nationalism (NAS), Religion (A) and Communism (KOM). The political right, however, strongly opposed this push.

### **Sukarno’s Support for Baperki**

In March 1963, at the opening of Baperki’s 8th Congress, Sukarno delivered a speech expressing his support for the organisation. He stressed that the Chinese were under no obligation to change their names, especially if they had not altered their religious beliefs, as this was a personal matter. According to him, the various *suku*, which also means foot (*kaki*), are the feet of one body, or the body of the Indonesian nation (Siauw, 1963; Departemen Penerangan RI, 1963).

Through this metaphor, Sukarno clearly acknowledged the “Chinese Peranakans” as one of the many *suku* within Indonesia. Although the Chinese Peranakan did not possess a specific “territory” within the country, Sukarno recognised them as an inseparable part of the Indonesian nation.

### **Siauw Giok Tjhan’s Support for Sukarno**

At the same event, Siauw delivered a speech expressing deep admiration and respect for Sukarno. He declared that Baperki sought to realise the nation’s ideals by creating “true Indonesian citizens” who would serve as “defenders of Pancasila” and “active participants of the Indonesian revolution.”

In December 1963, in Baperki’s annual report, Siauw once again invoked Sukarno’s rhetoric to defend the organisation’s position. He expressed gratitude to “President Sukarno, the Leader of the State, the Great Leader of the Revolution” for his unwavering support and reaffirmed Baperki’s full commitment to Sukarno (Siauw, 1963c). Siauw consistently maintained that Sukarno’s revolutions were key to achieving socialism. In his view, Baperki functioned as a “tool of the revolution,” alongside the PKI, Partindo, Perti, and others, working towards the goal of a socialist revolution. He further maintained that there was no need for “assimilation” until socialism was fully realised,

emphasising that the Chinese minority must actively contribute to the Indonesian “socialist revolution” (Siauw, 1963c).

In 1964, Siauw continued to vigorously champion Sukarno’s “revolution banner.” He also openly supported the PKI and embraced Lenin’s concept of the national question. A clear example of this support appeared in Siauw’s interview with *Zhong Cheng Bao Daily* (the Chinese edition of *Warta Bhakti*), which is quoted below:

“*Zhong Cheng Bao*: “Some time ago, LPKB in front of the meeting of the Journalists Union raised questions with regard to ‘assimilation’ and ‘integration’. What is your view on this question? What are your views on the issue of progress in resolving citizenship rights?”

Siauw: “I fully agree with what Njoto, Editor-in-Chief of the *People’s Daily*, stated at the meeting. We must use revolutionary dialectics in understanding President Sukarno’s speech of 15 July 1963 which used the term ‘assimilation’. To better understand the problem, it’s a good idea to pay attention to what Njoto said. When he discussed the issue of ‘assimilation’ and ‘integration’ with President Sukarno, President Sukarno said he did not see any difference between these two terms. He argued, what is more important is, when we build national solidarity and unity, it should be based on equality of all existing *sukus*, including *sukus* of foreign descendants.

Then, we must also note Lenin’s words based on the experience of the development of society, that after the end of the world revolution, after the whole world enters a classless society, assimilation will occur naturally among the existing ethnic groups (Minzu Cidian, 1984). However, talking about “assimilation” before the world revolution is finished not only proves that advocating assimilation is unwise, but also proves that “they are anarchist intellectuals.” Proponents of this assimilation were called “feudal intellectuals.” In fact, assimilation is a historical process that should not be disputed, as long as it takes place naturally and will succeed healthily. However, if it is carried out unnaturally and contains coercion, bad results will occur (Minzu Cidian, 1984).

Today there are people “selling patches,” often using—or more accurately abusing—the fact that in society there is still racial discrimination and racist violence, as a pretext to propagate a panacea called “total assimilation”—such propaganda obviously has a specific purpose: to encourage people of foreign descent, especially Chinese to “change names,” “intermarry,” and then in the field of trade encourage so-called “indigenous policy,” “executing a joint venture.”

Thus, among people of Chinese descent, there is a delusion that through assimilation, they can achieve fair treatment in life without the need to struggle for the socialist revolution. Apparently,

those who carried out this “total assimilation” propaganda sought to divert the attention of the Chinese from the revolution. As Indonesian citizens who accept “Pancasila” and support the political struggle of “Manipol,” our task is to awaken the Chinese community, raising their awareness and courage to actively participate in the revolution and to realise a socialist society that does not tolerate human oppression and exploitation.

Instead of wasting time, energy and funds on “renaming,” “intermarrying” and propagating the “benefits” of “indigenous politics” policies, such as conducting “joint ventures” with natives in trade, it would be far better to recognise that the effort to eradicate racism is inseparable from the struggle to achieve the goals of the August 17, 1945 revolution (Siauw, 1964).

Before 1959, Siauw’s speeches and writings avoided explicit references to class struggle. By 1964, however, in a written interview, he openly articulated Marxist-Leninist views. While addressing the topic of citizens’ rights, he stated that the injustice of citizens’ rights that is happening today is caused by class and class oppression. Only after exterminating class can citizens’ rights get a solution and get real fair treatment. Therefore, solving the problem of citizens’ rights cannot be separated from the struggle to complete the goals of the socialist revolution. People of foreign descent, especially those of Chinese descent, must join the revolutionary ranks of the Indonesian people, together to carry out the “People’s Suffering Mandate (Ampera)” (Siauw, 1964).

### ***Suku Peranakan Tionghoa or Suke Tionghoa?***

Although Siauw actively supported Sukarno and frequently expressed gratitude for his backing of Baperki and the Chinese community, a divergence in their views emerged regarding the concept of the “Peranakan Chinese” in Indonesia. In March 1963, at the opening of the 8th Congress of Baperki, Sukarno introduced the concept of “*suku Peranakan Tionghoa*” (Chinese Peranakan ethnic group), drawing a distinction between “*Peranakan Tionghoa*” (local-born Indonesian-speaking Chinese) and “*Totok Tionghoa*” (Chinese-speaking Chinese, mainly foreign-born). Sukarno acknowledged the “*Peranakan Tionghoa*,” not the “*Totok Tionghoa*,” as one of the *suku* in Indonesia, but he did not elaborate further on the specifics of the *Peranakan Tionghoa*. Notably, he avoided the term *Suku Tionghoa*, which at that time would have encompassed both *Peranakans* and *Totok Chinese*.

Siauw, however, did not engage with this concept of *suku Peranakan Tionghoa* in his speeches or writings. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, he rarely used the term “*Peranakan Tionghoa*” at all. This raises an intriguing question about how the idea of “*suku Peranakan Tionghoa*” relates to his own thinking. One possible explanation is that if Siauw had accepted the concept of “*suku Peranakan Tionghoa*,” it would imply that the “*Totok Chinese*” group in Indonesia was excluded from this *suku*. Siauw may have believed that all Chinese Indonesians, whether *Peranakan* or *Totok*, should be considered part of the broader “*suku Tionghoa*” in Indonesia. As a result, he may have

intentionally avoided engaging with Sukarno's idea of Indonesian *suku* and refrained from delving into the relationship between ethnic Chinese and Indonesian nationhood. Had he countered Sukarno by advancing an alternative concept (such as *Suku Tionghoa*), it would almost certainly have created tensions with Sukarno. Without the protection of Sukarno, Baperki would have been left vulnerable to its many opponents - including a wide range of Muslim and non-Muslim organisations, and its very survival would have been jeopardised.

It is important to note that during the 1950s and 1960s, a clear distinction existed within the Chinese community in Indonesia between the *Peranakan Chinese* and the Totok Chinese. The Peranakan Chinese, locally born and raised, primarily spoke Indonesian or regional languages at home, while the Totok Chinese, mostly born in China, typically spoke Chinese dialects or Mandarin in their households. Even the first-generation descendants of the Totok Chinese remained strongly influenced by their parents' culture, often fluent in Chinese dialects or Mandarin, thereby continuing to be classified as Totoks. Despite these distinctions, both groups co-existed within the Chinese community and Baperki garnered support from both. Among the Totoks, those sympathetic to Beijing were particularly strong supporters of Baperki (Coppel, 2012). This dual base of support likely explains why Siauw chose to downplay the differences between these two subgroups.

Nevertheless, after he was released from detention in 1978, he became more aware of the political importance of the *Peranakans*, though he continued to disregard the concept of *Suku Peranakan Tionghoa*. For instance, in 1981, he published an autobiography (in Indonesian) that included a chapter titled "Chinese Peranakan Minority" (*Minoritas: Peranakan Tionghoa*) (Siauw, 1981). He noted in this chapter that the Indonesian society was pluralistic and had many kinds of big and small *suku* and many kinds of foreign descendants, who for generations settled in Indonesia and have developed into new *suku* (Siauw, 1981).

Despite acknowledging Indonesia's many *suku*, Siauw did not refer to Sukarno's 1963 speech in his autobiography, nor did he directly engage with the concept of the "*Peranakan Tionghoa*" as a distinct *suku* in Indonesia. Instead, Siauw simply stated that many foreign-descended communities, after living in Indonesia for generations, would gradually evolve into many "new" *sukus*. Following this, Siauw continued to describe Chinese Peranakan (*Peranakan Tionghoa*) as a "golongan" (group), rather than a "*suku*." Although he frequently used the term "*Peranakan Tionghoa*" in his autobiography, Siauw used the term "golongan Tionghoa" (Chinese group) and "*keturunan Tionghoa*" (Chinese descent) more often to refer to the Chinese Indonesian. This suggests that he did not think the concept of *suku* Tionghoa or *suku Peranakan Tionghoa* was important for the Chinese in Indonesia.

Siauw might have been aware of certain new developments within the Chinese Indonesian community following his release from detention, but he did not live long enough to grasp their implications. Indeed, the thirty-two years of Suharto's rule produced a fundamentally different type of

Indonesian Chinese community. This transformation stemmed from the regime's total assimilation policy introduced towards the Chinese minority. The Suharto government succeeded in dismantling three major pillars of Chinese cultural life (i.e., Chinese schools, Chinese media, and Chinese organisations) (廖建裕/J. Liao, 2019). Even Chinese religions such as Agama Khonghucu (Confucian Religion) were deregistered and hence affected the number of their followers (Suryadinata, 2024). The name-changing policy adopted during the New Order further "Indonesianised" the Chinese community. Moreover, the Suharto regime liberalised the Indonesian citizenship law, facilitating the naturalisation of Indonesian Chinese who were still foreign (China) citizens. New Chinese migration was prohibited, thus stabilising the size of the Chinese population. Collectively, these measures made the Chinese minority far more Indonesian in everyday life and identity. They did not become indigenous Indonesians (*Pribumi*), but they had become increasingly "Peranakanised."

The fall of Suharto in May 1998 also ended the assimilation policy of Suharto, creating space for a renewed expression of Chinese ethnicity. This shift was visible in the revival of the three pillars of Chinese culture and the re-recognition of the Confucian Religion. Yet this revival remained limited as Chinese Indonesians did not reuse their Chinese names; the number of Confucian adherents did not increase but instead declined and no Chinese-medium schools resembling the pre-Suharto model were re-established (Davis, 2005). Major ethnic Chinese social organisations such as Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia (PSMTI, 1998) and Perhimpunan Indonesia-Tionghoa (Perhimpunan INTI, 1999) emerged during this period. However, their programmes and activities reflected a strong Indonesian nationalism rather than an emphasis on Chinese ethnicity (Davis, 2010).

Equally significant was the revival of "*Peranakan* consciousness." For instance, in PSMTI's 1998 constitution, the organisation stated that it sought to facilitate the participation of "*warga Peranakan Tionghoa*" in Indonesian national development (PSMTI, 1998). By 2013, at its 5th National Congress in Pakan Baru, North Sumatra, PSMTI formally declared Chinese Indonesians as "*suku Tionghoa*," affirming their standing as one of Indonesia's ethnic groups within the Indonesian nation (PSMTI, 2013). Notably, they no longer used *suku Peranakan Tionghoa*, because by this time, the Totok Chinese had effectively become peranakanised.

The rise of a *Peranakan* identity has also been evident in the establishment of two *Peranakan* organisations: Persaudaraan *Peranakan Tionghoa* Warga Indonesia (Persaudaraan Pertiwi) and Asosiasi *Peranakan Tionghoa* Indonesia (Aspertina), both founded in 2011 to promote *Peranakan* culture (Suryadinata, 2022a). This renewed interest in *Peranakan* identity may be linked to the rise of China as a major power and the arrival of xin yimin, or the new Chinese migrants, to Indonesia. Although no official figures exist for the number of new migrants, earlier estimates suggested that 5 to 6 million had migrated to developed countries and about 20% to Southeast Asia. Of these, only about 100-120 thousand were believed to have come to Indonesia (Zhuang, 2007). However, these

estimates included migrant workers who are not permitted to stay in Indonesia permanently. Therefore, only those outside this category were likely to have been allowed to stay.

The new migrants are likely to form a new Totok Chinese society. Unlike the earlier Totok community, they tend to be better educated, possess stronger economic power, and are more mobile. Most importantly, they maintain close ties to a rising China, making integration into Indonesian society more difficult. They are the “new Totok Chinese,” co-existing alongside the *Peranakan Tionghoa* (Suryadinata, 2020). Given this development of the *xin yimin*, the *suku Peranakan Chinese* concept might be relevant again. Chinese Indonesians, especially the Peranakan Chinese, seek recognition not only as Indonesian citizens but as part of the Indonesian nation and to distinguish them from the new migrants. It is therefore not surprising that some leaders have called for the revival of the notion of *suku Peranakan Tionghoa/suku Tionghoa* again. Since the fall of Suharto, the Indonesian state has undergone significant changes, and the concept of the Indonesian nation is no longer rooted in a *pribumi* (indigenous Indonesians) framework but is increasingly understood as multi-ethnic. Within this new context, Chinese Indonesians may again find the space to claim recognition as one of Indonesia's *sukus*.

### **Beyond *Suku Peranakan*?**

Reflecting on Siauw Giok Tjhan and Baperki's views on the position of the Chinese within the Indonesian nation, several conclusions can be drawn:

Siauw did not distinguish clearly between the concepts of “nations” (*bangsa/nasion*) and “citizens” (*warganegara*). His primary concern was securing of civic rights, a focus that significantly advanced the recognition of Indonesians of Chinese descent as full citizens. A key achievement was the RI-PRC Dual Citizenship Agreement, which stipulated that only dual citizens were required to formally choose Indonesian nationality. Those who had participated in the 1955 Indonesian general elections were exempt from this requirement, a major victory for the Chinese community. Furthermore, Siauw and Baperki worked actively to combat racism by challenging groups that propagated discriminatory practices and curbing their arbitrary actions.

However, Siauw's failure to distinguish between the concepts of “nation” and “citizen” meant that he did not address the broader questions concerning the place of the Chinese within the Indonesian nation. It was only when assimilationist groups began attacking Baperki that Siauw started discussing the assimilation challenges faced by the Chinese as a minority group. Arguing that it is enough for the ethnic Chinese to be good Indonesian citizens and participating in a revolution, they did not need to relinquish their ethnic identity. This view was shaped in part by the influence of the thoughts of Marx and Stalin, particularly the notion that true assimilation could only occur in a classless society. Siauw looked to Soviet and Chinese socialism as models for resolving minority



issues through the elimination of class and ethnic conflicts. Yet this belief proved overly optimistic. Ethnic tensions within the Soviet Union remained unresolved, and ethnic problems ultimately contributed to its dissolution in 1991. Likewise, China has continued to confront serious ethnic challenges. Siauww failed to appreciate the complexity of these issues during the 1950s and early 1960s, leading him to overestimate the capacity of orthodox socialism and communism to resolve them.

The political climate of the time played a crucial role in shaping Siauww's views and actions. After 1959, left-wing forces gained significant momentum, and only a few political parties, together with Sukarno, were prepared to recognize the Chinese as a distinct group within Indonesia. Consequently, Siauww and Baperki aligned themselves with Sukarno, vigorously promoting Indonesian-style socialism. At that time, socialism appeared to have widespread political support, and Siauww firmly believed that a socialist society would resolve the challenges faced by minorities, including the Chinese. Guided by this conviction, Siauww and Baperki called for the "integration" of the Chinese into the Indonesian revolutionary movement. Yet this approach ultimately failed to address the deeper structural challenges confronting the Chinese community. Instead, events took an unexpected turn, culminating in the ascendancy of anti-revolutionary forces.

The year 1965 marked a watershed in Indonesian history. The so-called "G30S" movement precipitated the annihilation of the communist movement, the fall of Sukarno, and the rise of Suharto's 32-year-long military regime. Under Suharto, Baperki was dissolved, Siauww was arrested, and Sukarno was placed under house arrest. The notion of "Peranakan Chinese" as part of the Indonesian nation was effectively abandoned. Suharto's government introduced a policy of total assimilation, dividing Indonesians into "*pribumi*" (indigenous) and "*non-pribumi*" (non-indigenous), with all Chinese Indonesians, regardless of whether they were "*Peranakan Tionghoa*" or "*Tionghoa Totok*," classified as "*non-pribumi*." This classification led to pressure for Chinese Indonesians to assimilate into the indigenous majority. In 1966, a name-changing regulation was issued which, though officially voluntary, created significant social pressure, prompting many *Peranakan Chinese* Indonesians to adopt Indonesian-sounding names. The May 1998 racial riots, which targeted Chinese Indonesians, further exposed the persistence of racism in Indonesia, underscoring that the struggle for full integration and recognition was far from over.

Recognising the concept of *Peranakan Tionghoa* as an Indonesian *suku* remains crucial for the full acceptance of Chinese Indonesians as part of the Indonesian nation. In 1976, Professor Wang Gungwu observed that had Chinese Indonesians been "accepted as an Indonesian *suku*, called "Tjina" or "Tionghoa" or some such name, that was neither recognisably Chinese nor associated with *pribumi* origins yet unmistakably Indonesian, then that would indeed be unique" (Wang, 1976). He further argued:

"....an Indonesian *suku* called "Tionghoa" might well have come about.



The nucleus of this was the *Peranakan*, and the only chance they really had to achieve their own *suku* status were the years 1945-65. For a time, they nearly made it. Had they done so, they would have created something no other group of Chinese in the region even thought of creating” (Wang, 1976: 210).

However, since the collapse of the New Order (1966–1998), there has been a shift in the political and social landscape in Indonesia. The fall of Suharto in 1998 ended the military regime’s anti-Chinese policies, ushering in a new democratic era. This shift allowed the Chinese community to re-enter Indonesia’s political and social life in ways that were not possible before. Moreover, the concept of an Indonesian nation is no longer based on a *pribumi*-centred model but has increasingly moved towards a multiethnic understanding. This raises an important question: is there now space for recognising the *suku Peranakan Tionghoa* or *suku Tionghoa* within the framework of the Indonesian nation?

Before attempting an answer, it is necessary to revisit the concept of “ethnic group” and “nation.” These concepts have been widely debated, and it is not possible here to go through those discussions. For the purpose of this study, I rely on the conceptualisations developed by Max Weber and expanded by scholars such as R.A. Schermerhorn. Broadly, an ethnic group refers to a community bound by a belief in a common ancestry, real or imagined, and by shared memories of a collective past, traditions, and often language (Suryadinata, 2015). The concept of “nation” is even more complex. Beyond traditional formulations by Rupert Emmerson and later by other sociologists such as Anthony Smith, younger scholars have approached nationhood from two broad perspectives. One is still grounded on ethnicity represented by theorists such as Walker Connor and James Kellas, while the other is based on “social construct”, a tradition associated with Ben Anderson and Ernest Gellner. These concepts have been discussed in some detail elsewhere (Suryadinata, 2015). In this paper, I will concentrate on the section regarding the relationship between ethnic groups and nations as this is most relevant.

Connor argues that while an ethnic group may evolve into a nation, many states are multi-ethnic, and the process of creating a shared national identity is lengthy and not easy, and in some cases may even lead to nation-fragmentation. Kellas similarly pointed out that there are two types of nations: the ethno-nation, which is based on a dominant single ethnic group (such as Japan), while the other is a social (civic) nation based on multiple ethnic groups. The majority of nations in the world are social nations rather than ethno-nations.

Indonesia is one such multi-ethnic society (*pelbagai suku* or *suku bangsa*), engaged in the ongoing project of building a social nation called *Bangsa* Indonesia based on numerous ethnic groups (*suku* or *suku bangsa*). Prior to the Suharto era, the Indonesian nation model was a liberal mode recognizing indigenous (i.e., non-ethnic Chinese) and non-indigenous (i.e., ethnic Chinese) groups

as components of the Indonesian nation. During Suharto's rule, however, a rigidly *pribumi*-based model was imposed. After the fall of Suharto, Indonesia largely returned to a more inclusive pre-1966 approach: both indigenous and non-indigenous groups are recognized as national components of the Indonesian nation. Even so, the nation-building process in Indonesia is still in progress. The project of creating an Indonesian Nation is still far from complete. When Indonesia elites and the public speak of the Indonesian Nation, they continue to refer implicitly to the various ethnic groups (*suku* or *suku bangsa*) that make up the nation, reflecting a return, in some ways, to Sukarno's *suku* based conception of national identity. Within this context, a discussion of the *suku Peranakan Chinese* remains pertinent.

A recent article has suggested that *suku bangsa* differs from ethnicity and race, arguing that it is a social group unique to Indonesia (Purnama, 2025). The difference between *suku* (or *suku bangsa*) and ethnicity remains a debatable point. Many social science concepts are from the West, and when they were used in the Asian context and translated into Asian languages, certain gaps might exist. This is not the place to discuss whether *suku bangsa* is an ethnic group. What matters is that the paper underscores the continuing importance of the *suku bangsa* framework in Indonesia's social and political process today. It is an observation that aligns with the argument put forward in my paper. Whether future Indonesian governments will accept the *Peranakan Chinese* as a *suku* or *suku bangsa* will ultimately depend on the evolving relationship between Chinese Indonesians and political elites, as well as broader domestic and global developments.

### Conclusion

This study offers a careful examination of a major *Peranakan Chinese* leader, *Siauw Giok Tjhan* of Baperki, with special reference to his role in nation-building. Siauw's tendency to equate ethnicity with citizenship and his reluctance to accept Sukarno's concept of *Peranakan Tionghoa* as a *suku* had a complex background. His uneasy relationship with the Totok Chinese community may have been a factor, but his belief in Marxism and Socialism was likely another factor. Equally important was the sociopolitical reality of his time: the Indonesian Chinese community was divided between the *Peranakan* and the Totok. Accepting the *suku Peranakan Tionghoa* as a distinct *suku* could have deepened this division and weakened the Baperki support base, especially the financial support from the Totok Chinese. Such a split would have hindered Baqeri's social and political development in that period.

It should also be noted that during Suharto's 32-year rule, Chinese Indonesians underwent profound Indonesianisation, while the Totok Chinese were Peranakanised. In 2006, the newly promulgated Indonesian Citizenship Law further formalized this shift by defining Indonesian citizens as those considered indigenous Indonesians (*Orang-Orang Bangsa Indonesia Asli*). These "indigenous

Indonesians” were defined as “Indonesian citizens since birth and never acquired foreign citizenship based on his/her own will” (Undang-Undang No. 12 Tahun 2006). Furthermore, according to Presidential Decision No.12/2014, Chinese Indonesians are now referred to as “*warga bangsa Indonesia yang berasal keturunan Tionghoa*” (members of the Indonesian Nation originating from Chinese descent). (Keputusan Presiden No. 12 Tahun 2014) Based on these legal statements, the terms “Tionghoa” or “*Peranakan Tionghoa*” are recognised as part of the Indonesian nation, not as an Indonesian *suku*.

From the legal perspective, the long-standing problem of Chinese national identity has been resolved. However, from a socio-cultural perspective, the issue has not been settled. It is because Chinese Indonesians are still not recognized as a *suku*; in other words, they are still not really part of the Indonesian nation. Since the Indonesian nation is still in the making, and is understood as consisting of various *sukus*, recognition as a member of the Indonesian nation requires acceptance by the state as a *suku*. Without this, Chinese Indonesians are expected to assimilate into existing Indonesian *suku*, or else risk continuing to be regarded as partial members of the Indonesian nation, if not as outsiders altogether.

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### Notes

- 1 See Suryadinata (1978). In one section of this book, I briefly discussed the life of Siauw Giok Tjhan (p.102), including his relations with various Chinese associations and his socialist ideas. However, I did not elaborate much on his concept of the Indonesian nation vis-à-vis ethnic Chinese or his views on Sukarno’s proposal to recognise *Peranakan Chinese* as an Indonesian *suku*. (pp.65-72.)
- 2 Tan Ling Djie was criticised for the mistake of “Surrenderism.” Later it was called “Tan Ling Djie-ism.”
- 3 Siauw was appointed Menteri Negara Urusan *Peranakan* in the Amir Sjarifuddin II Cabinet (11 November 1947-29 January 1948). See Mizwar Djamily, 1986. Siauw Tiong Djin in his books noted that *Siauw Giok Tjhan* was appointed as “menteri...menangani urusan minoritas” (Siauw, 1999) and “minister for minority affairs” (Siauw, 2018).
- 4 All of these articles were first published in the *Star Weekly*; later, they were put together by a pro-assimilation group in a book entitled *Lahirnya Konsepsi Asimilasi*, Jakarta: Yayasan Tunas Bangsa, 1977.

- 5 However, Yap Thiam Hien continued the struggle for human rights, eventually becoming an influential legal scholar and a human rights defender.
- 6 “Menuju Ke Asimilasi Jang Wadjar”, *Star Weekly*, 26 March 1960. These 10 people included: Tjung Tin Jan (lawyer), Injo Beng Goat (Newspaper editor), Ong Hok Ham (university student), Lauchuantho (Economist), and Auwjong Peng Koen (lawyer and newspaper editor). Later Auw Jong changed his name to P. K. Ojong, founder of Kompas, the largest newspaper in Indonesia.
- 7 I could not find the “State Ideology Lecture, University of Res Publica, October 17, 1962.” There are only quotes from Siauw Tiong Djin, *Siauw Giok Tjhan* (1999).
- 8 There are a few publications that discuss Baperki. The early ones were by Mary-Somers Heidhues (1964) and Charles A. Coppel (1983), while the latest is by Siauw Tiong Djin (2018).

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