

Chinese

Profile

Nearly all Chinese in Indonesia came from either Fujian or Guangdong provinces in southern China. The dominant languages among these immigrants were Hokkien, Hakka and Cantonese.

Identifying someone in modern-day Indonesia as ethnic Chinese is not easy, because the physical characteristics, language, name and lifestyle of Chinese Indonesians are not always distinct from those of the indigenous population. Census figures do not record Chinese as a separate group. By one 2000 estimate, there may be as many as 6 million people of Chinese ancestry in Indonesia, though perhaps only one-third of them speak a Chinese language, usually either Min, Hakka or Yue. Indonesia's last official census in 2000, however, only recognized 1.9 per cent as Chinese, or approximately 1.9 million people.

There are marked differences between peranakan (local-born Chinese, often with some Indonesian ancestry) and totok (full-blooded Chinese, usually born in China). In general, the peranakan community's ties to their Chinese roots are more distant. Peranakan almost always speak Bahasa Indonesia as their first language and some have converted to Islam, although the majority are Christian, Confucian or Buddhist. Unlike the more strictly male-dominated totok Chinese, peranakan families recognize descent based on both female and male lines. In contrast, totok consider themselves as the 'real' Chinese, keeping Chinese culture and traditions alive through household shrines, celebrating Chinese festivals and providing private Chinese language instruction for their children.

Historical context

Small Chinese settlements have existed in Indonesia since the late thirteenth century, but larger-scale immigration took place under early Dutch rule when Chinese served as economic intermediaries between the Dutch East India Company and the Javanese. In the eighteenth century, Chinese were encouraged to immigrate to work the tin mines of Bangka and the gold mines of western Borneo (now Kalimantan), and to continue to settle in cities and towns forming a broad arc around Singapore. Since this Chinese immigration was almost entirely male, considerable intermarriage occurred, giving rise to Sino-Indonesian communities, particularly in eastern Java, West Sumatra and West Kalimantan, which adopted many local customs, ceremonies, manners and beliefs.

Large-scale Chinese immigration resumed with the development of extensive export agriculture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most were engaged in petty trading, mining or artisanship. This gave rise to the development of purely Chinese communities in Java and particularly in the Outer Islands, which retained Chinese language, religion and customs.

At independence however, nearly half of Chinese Indonesians failed to secure Indonesian citizenship, either because of continuing loyalty to China or Taiwan, or because of the difficulties in gaining citizenship papers. Many of these people became stateless when Indonesia broke off diplomatic relations

with China after the 1965 coup. The new government argued that China played a major part in encouraging the coup through the Communist Party (PKI). Normal diplomatic ties only resumed in 1990. Since then, the government has enacted new regulations to expedite the naturalization of ethnic Chinese. By 1992 only about 6 per cent, or 300,000, of approximately 6 million Chinese Indonesians were considered non-Indonesians. Almost all of these people were later given Chinese citizenship by the People's Republic of China.

The assimilation of the Chinese population into the local communities in which they live has been government policy since the 1970s. Before that the Chinese were forcibly separated from their non-Chinese neighbours. Prior to 1919, Chinese had to live in separate urban neighbourhoods and could travel only with government permits. Initially, under the Indonesian government's assimilation policy, the use of symbols of Chinese identity, such as Chinese characters in shops, was banned. Chinese-language newspapers, schools and public use of Chinese names were all banned, and many Chinese were forced or chose to take Indonesian names. President Suharto maintained close personal ties to many wealthy ethnic Chinese tycoons, and offered them substantial economic privileges, but he discouraged any overt expressions of Chinese identity for fear of encouraging anti-Chinese sentiment among poorer Indonesians.

In the 1990s, due to the policy of economic liberalism and the growth of the economy, anti-Chinese policies were muted or relaxed. After the fall of Suharto, local Chinese newspapers began reappearing, and more recently private Chinese schools have been allowed to operate.

Thousands of ethnic Chinese were killed in the anti-Communist pogroms following the failed coup in 1965, and anti-Chinese riots have occurred frequently since the 1970s. In 1974 student protests in Jakarta against the visit of the Japanese prime minister sparked off rioting that targeted Chinese-owned businesses. Under Suharto, anti-Chinese riots broke out on many other occasions across much of the country, leading to the deaths of hundreds of ethnic Chinese.

The most serious rioting of the Suharto era erupted in 1998, beginning in Java, and then on a much larger scale in Jakarta, Solo, Medan and several other cities. They were triggered in part by the economic strains brought about by the collapse in the value of the Indonesian currency, the rupiah. But there is also strong evidence that they were encouraged by elements of the security forces, perhaps to justify emergency measures to suppress the growing opposition to Suharto. After Suharto was re-appointed as President for a sixth term in March, student protests erupted on a scale not seen since the 1960s. Four students were shot dead on 12 May 1998, leading to widespread looting, burning, rape and murder over the next three days, which mainly targeted the ethnic Chinese. Many ethnic Chinese fled to other countries at this time. The rioting eventually forced Suharto to resign on 21 May.

Since 1998 violence and tensions have subsided, and the government of Indonesia has abolished many of the laws which previously restricted the use of Chinese languages and other discriminatory laws.

Chinese Indonesians continue to dominate many aspects of Indonesia's private economic sector. At the same time, many are rediscovering aspects of their culture and traditions which had for decades been prohibited or discouraged in Indonesia. In addition to opening centres or private educational programmes for the learning of Chinese, they are also becoming more visibly active in national politics.

Current issues

Several laws that discriminated against the Chinese minority have been changed or removed, including the cancellation in 2005 of the Indonesian Citizenship Certificate (SBKRI) decree, under which ethnic

Chinese were given a special code in their ID which identified them as Chinese and gave the bureaucracy the opportunity to discriminate against them. In the 2004 elections, there were several parties that openly claimed to be representing ethnic Chinese, something that was unheard of during the rule of former president Suharto. Although these parties won only a small number of votes, they did raise the profile of the Chinese community. Many senior Indonesian officials also openly proclaimed their Chinese ancestry.

Developments in 2006 indeed show a sea-change in attitudes towards the Chinese minority, at least from state authorities: the Indonesian government in that year recognized Confucianism as a formal religion (which should allow the issuing of marriage licences and identification documents recognizing the involved individuals' Confucian beliefs, for example), and the Chinese New Year officially became a national holiday. A new citizenship law also adopted in 2006 should permit the naturalization of most ethnic Chinese who were born in Indonesia who may still not be citizens.

Public signs in Chinese, and Chinese language newspapers are no longer banned, and have begun to make their appearance in Indonesia, and various private institutions have been set up to teach Mandarin. Radio and television broadcasts of news in Chinese have begun to make their appearance, and especially to cover important cultural events such as the Chinese New Year.