



Anna Gabriella Szabó

Ethnic Policies Toward People of Chinese Descent in Indonesia and Malaysia

Topic and Research Question

The first substantial wave of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia took place in the twelfth century. It was however not until the colonial era, with its imposed divide-and-rule policies, that a system of ethnic segregation was put into practice. This system was to a certain extent both backed by and perpetuated with the help of anti-Chinese sentiments, which were accentuated during the formative years of nation building in Indonesia and Malaysia, where people of Chinese descent became increasingly targeted by ethnic policies. In the case of Indonesia, the implemented policies went beyond political and economic aspects and aimed at a complete eradication of the Chinese cultural heritage. What did these policies imply? What differences and similarities can be identified when comparing the outcome of the political agendas targeting the citizens of Chinese descent in Indonesia and Malaysia?

When the nation state concept gets intertwined with the notion of a community sharing common roots, there is also a need of a founding myth (Anderson 1983). This myth is mostly established within the context of the dangerous triad of "one nation, one people, one language" and people of Chinese descent were identified as essential outsiders (Chirot and Reid 1997), often treated "as a disconnected analytical category, instead of as an embedded component of the nation's postcolonial evolution" (Liu 2011). The point of departure for this research can be found in the following questions: What does the concept of Chinese heritage in Indonesia and Malaysia imply? Who claims to belong to this heritage? How is this heritage advocated? These questions lead to the research question:

Have ethnic policies affected the dynamic dimensions of Chinese cultural heritage in Indonesia and Malaysia?

State of the Art

During the last four decades, the explicit focus of research related to people of Chinese descent in Southeast Asia was set on the correlation between economic predominance and intra-ethnic structures, where the hypothesis of a positive correlation is however increasingly contested (Gomez 1999; Tarling and Gomez 2007). Research related to the people of Chinese decent with a focus on the interface between politics and cultural heritage has been scarce, especially so in the Indonesian case, which is strongly influenced by the deliberate stigmatization of the Chinese

Indonesians during the era of Suharto (1966-1998). The authoritative academic work in the field, providing for a substantiated background to the socio-political conditions that can be regarded as vital for an understanding of contemporary politics and cultural discourse, are of older date (Clarson 1968; Purcell 1965; Salmon 1983; Skinner 1957 and 1959; Wang 1970; Willmott 1960). Relevant research of younger date in the domain of politics (Collins 2006; Coppel 2002 and 2013; Freedman 2000; Hara 2002 and 2013; Liu 2013; Suryadinata 2001, 2005 and 2013; Wan 2011 and 2012) as well as in the domains of heritage discourse, history, sociology, and religion (Abalahin 2005; Cheng et al. 2014; De Bernardi 2006 and 2009; Duara 2009; Goh 2009; Graezer Bideau and Kilani 2009; Heidhues 2000; Tan 2007; Wang 1996) play a vital role for this thesis.

Methodology and Approach

As the research question is focusing on the dynamic dimension of Chinese cultural heritage, examining a perspective of heritage discourse where readily available data are inexistent, a research model built on qualitative methods was regarded as the most suitable approach. Two non-governmental organizations (NGOs focusing on heritage were chosen for a comparative study (Boen Hian Tong in Semarang on Java and Penang Heritage Trust in Penang) where fieldwork was carried out in 2014 (Indonesia and Malaysia) with a follow up journey in 2014 (Malaysia) and 2015 (Indonesia), including interviews and participant observation. To understand the modalities of ethnic oppression in a broader context, Stanley Tambiah's (1994) framework has been adapted. Tambiah recognizes similarities in the aftermath of decolonialization among countries with similar ethnic compositions, where power is "transferred" to the local elites, followed by optimistic "nation-making" where internal diversity and social fissures are played down in favor of the pre-eminence of the nation state. This optimism is then interrupted by ethnic conflict, where the state *takes on a new role as arbitrator to enable the different regional cultures to obtain their "authentic" culture*. The access to capacities and symbolic capital, material rewards (income and commodities) as well as honors (titles and offices) are from now on based on ethnic affiliation.

Main Facts

In 1965, a failed coup resulted in an ardent intent to exterminate all alleged Indonesian communists, and people of Chinese descent were under general suspicion. In 1967 "The basic Policy for the Solution of the Chinese Problem" was promulgated with new "codes of conduct" for Chinese Indonesians (Coppel 2002). Chinese names were forcibly replaced by Indonesian-sounding names, the press was closed down and cultural practices banned. Suryadinata (2001; 2005 and 2013) refers to this phenomenon as the destruction of the 'three pillars' (*sān bǎo* 三寶, "three treasures"). This policy was obtained until 2000, resulting in a stigmatization of Chinese identity and heritage for over 34 years.

Malaysia, with a higher percentage of people of Chinese descent within the nation (approx. 22% versus 3% in Indonesia), experienced a cultural riot between Malays and Chinese Malaysians in 1969. To appease the Malays, the NEP (New Economic Policy) was implemented to: raise *bumiputera* (native Malay) ownership of total share, create new employment for *bumiputera*, provide *bumiputera* with subsidized loans and financial aid, as well as support to poor households (Zainal 2006). This preferential treatment of *bumiputera* has resulted in institutional discrimination toward non-*bumiputera* citizens of Malaysia.

Results

The affirmative policies NEP and NCP (National Culture Policy) in Malaysia have in various respects reduced people of Chinese descent, as well as other non-*bumiputera* into "second-class citizens" - however the Malaysian NGO examined shows no signs of any explicit state imposed retrenchment of Chinese heritage. The Malaysian policies affecting heritage can possibly be regarded as pragmatic: the state approves if heritage generates revenues. In the Indonesian case the ethnic policies implemented in 1967 have led to severe damage of tangible heritage, as architecture or artefacts with Chinese imprints have been either destroyed or neglected, and intangible heritage, as only a fragment of people of Chinese descent in Semarang are able to speak Chinese. Further, the action-range of the researched NGO is very limited and predominantly focused on festivities around the Chinese New Year, which is also a national holiday (*Imlek*). Although many initiatives have been carried out to reinforce a multi-cultural membership, the structure of

the Malaysian NGO has stayed almost intact since its inception in 1986, and people of Chinese descent make up for approximately 95%. This number mirrors the ethnic segregation in Malaysia that has been reinforced through the NEP and NCP. In Indonesia, more than half of the members of the NGO are native Javanese without any specific relation to China, which is a consequence of the policy from 1967. On the other hand, the current political climate in Indonesia allows for an understanding of Chinese heritage as a part of the national culture, which is visible in the photo below: Chinese heritage is accessible to, and welcomed by an increasing part of the Indonesian population, regardless of ethnic affiliation.



Venue on Boen Hian Tong, 2015

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at/>

About the Author

Anna Gabriella Szabó holds a Magister Degree in Cultural Sciences from the University of Vienna. She is currently working on a project in the interface between dance, heritage and migration in Southeast Asia. This thesis is part of the MA Program on East Asian Economy and Society at the University of Vienna.

Contact information:
gabszabo@hotmail.com



Examination Date: 13 11 2015