Ethnic Policies Toward People of Chinese Descent in Indonesia and Malaysia

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 segmentation 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 mostly established within the context of the dangerous triad of “one nation, one people, one language” and disconnected analytical category, instead of as an embedded component of the nation’s postcolonial evolution” (Liu 2011). The point of departure for this triad of “one nation, one people, one language” and disconnected analytical category, instead of as an embedded component of the nation’s postcolonial evolution” (Liu 2011). The point of departure for this thesis is the idea of a founding myth (Anderson 1983) 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 incoherent, 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) and 2015 (Indonesia), including interviews and participant observation. To understand the modalities of ethnic oppression in a broader context, Stanley Tambiah’s (1984) framework has been adapted. Tambiah recognizes similarities in the aftermath of de-colonialization 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.

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 were under general suspicion. Extermination of the ‘three pillars’ (sams (one), ‘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.

References

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