

## **The *Tionghoa*'s Position in the History of Indonesia-China Relations from 1950 to 1998: When Two Countries "Honour" is at Stake**

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### **Abstract**

The *Tionghoa* have a unique position in the history of Indonesia-China relations. Thung Julan analyzed their position within the framework of an "outsider within and insider without", in which the *Tionghoa* are expected to act as a "bridge" linking both nations. This view is interesting to discuss more deeply, especially due to some historical events pertaining to Indonesia-China diplomatic relations from 1950-1998. During those events, each country, but especially China, exploited the *Tionghoa* for their own benefit. This article uses a historical approach that includes heuristic stages, verification/criticism, interpretation and historiography to show the position of the *Tionghoa* in the relations between Indonesia and China. Subsequently, in that context, it considers to what extent the *Tionghoa* can act as a "bridge" that links both nations and countries, especially when "honour" is at stake. This analysis was conducted within the framework of the concept of *mianzi*, which in Chinese culture contains the meaning of "honour", including the dignity and sovereignty of the nation. Thus, this research shows that in some Indonesia-China relations historical events are related to the *Tionghoa* and that China has always made an effort to not "lose face" or *diu mian*.

**Keywords:** *Tionghoa, Indonesia-China relations, mianzi concept, honour*

### **1. Introduction**

The diplomatic relations between the Republic of Indonesia and the People's Republic of China (RI-PRC/Indonesia-China) were officially opened in April 1950. In 1967 the relation was interrupted, but it was later recommenced in 1990. Two major problems burdened the RI-PRC relations in the early era and before relations were restored (1950-1990), namely, the communist ideology adopted by the PRC and the *Tionghoa*, that is Indonesians of Chinese descent.

Along with both internal changes and the developments of globalization affecting the two countries, especially in the last few decades, ideological problems do not become a major obstacle anymore. On the other hand, the *Tionghoa* problem is still a source of tension in the relations between Indonesia and China, and the *Tionghoa* are often perceived as an important asset by both Indonesia and China. The *Tionghoa* are Chinese descendants, so they are also part of *Huaqiao* – that is Chinese who live outside of China. These individuals still have strong ties to their ancestral lands, and the PRC government consciously makes frequent use of that emotional bond, urging the *Huaqiao* to support the development of ancestral lands (Thuno, 2001).

Indonesia is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world. Its diversity is enriched by ethnic groups who are descendants of other nations, such as Chinese, Arabians, Indians, Dutch and other nations. According to the results of the 2010 population census, the number of the *Tionghoa* was about 2.8 million people, equivalent to 1.2 per cent of the total population of Indonesia (Evi, Hasbullah and Pramono, 2016, p. 7). As is the case for the other ethnic groups living in Indonesia, the presence of the *Tionghoa* is important to consider due to their considerable population spread throughout Indonesia and their distinctive socio-cultural position and activity. Thus, this article investigates the following question: “Historically, what has been the position of the *Tionghoa* with regard to Indonesia-China relations?”

The original *Tionghoa* were Chinese immigrants who became legal Indonesian citizens (Warga Negara Indonesia/WNI). Thung Julian sees the *Tionghoa* condition in terms of the concept of “outsider within” and “insider without” previously used by Patricia Hill Collins to discuss the intellectual contribution of black female academics in the field of feminist sociology in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Based on the concept, Thung concluded the following:

For Indonesia, the *Tionghoa* citizens are politically an integral part of the Indonesian nation, while culturally, it is an outsider within. In contrast to China, the *Tionghoa* ethnic culture is part of Chinese society, but politically it is a “foreign citizen” (insider without)... The *Tionghoa* can act as a bridge connecting both nation and state, but with the position as above the *Tionghoa* must be careful in addressing the power relations between the two countries... and require special skills to enable the *Tionghoa* citizens to become insider within Indonesia and outsider within China. (Thung, 2008)

Thung Julian’s idea – *Tionghoa* citizens can become insiders within Indonesia and outsiders within China – is an ideal condition that might be possible to realize. However, Julian’s message to “be careful” and to use “special skills” shows that in practice this is not an easy thing. Among the many factors that will have a significant impact on this process, the “honour of each country” is a sensitive one. Based on this background, the central topic of this article is the position of the *Tionghoa* in Indonesia-China relations. In that context,

it is interesting to consider to what extent the *Tionghoa* can act as a “bridge” that links both nations and countries, especially when “honour” is at stake.

This study employs a historical research method that included four stages: heuristic, verification/criticism, interpretation and historiography. The heuristic and verification stage was done through a literature study, a number of books on *Tionghoa* and Indonesia-China relations were used as the main reference for this article, including Hong Liu (2011), David Mazingo (2007), Charles A. Coppel (1994), and Leo Suryadinata (1984; 2017). Although these books are recognized as valid by the world’s leading sinologists, their data are critically addressed in this paper by comparing data from various sources, including from secondary sources. The analysis in the interpretation phase is based on the concept of “*mianzi*” or “face” which is one of the important concepts in Chinese culture. Through this concept can be presented the reconstruction of several events related to the position of the *Tionghoa* in the history of Indonesia-China relations, as well as how the concept has influenced the attitude of each party. The historiography stage is performed using the rules of narrative history writing, which according to Lemon’s (2003) narrative is an account of “what happened”, does not deal with single happenings, and is different from a chronicle. History therefore revolves around narrative – that is, the apprehension of situations which change because of things that happen (pp. 298-301). In this article, the situation that will be apprehend is the position of the *Tionghoa* in the history of Indonesia-China relations.

## **2. “Honour” in the Concept of *Mianzi***

In Chinese, both *mianzi* (面子) and *lian* (脸) are nouns that mean “face”, and both words have figurative meanings related to honour, reputation, trust and dignity. Although the figurative sense of “face” exists in many cultures, this concept has unique characteristics in China and is more pervasive and more nuanced than in other societies. This uniqueness is due to the fact that Chinese society values hierarchy, social roles and interpersonal relations to a high degree. Therefore, “face” plays a key role in Chinese social contexts more than in other cultures. Moreover, *mian* and *lian* have specific meanings with subtle differences, as explained by Hu (1944):

Verbally the two sets of criteria are distinguished by two words which on the physical level both mean “face”. One of these, *mien-tze*, stands for the kind of prestige ... reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation. This is prestige that is accumulated by means of personal effort or clever manoeuvring. For this kind of recognition ego is dependent at all times on his external environment. The other kind of “face” ... *lien* is the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation:

the man who will fulfill his obligations regardless of the hardships involved, who under all circumstances shows himself a decent human being. (Hu, 1944, p. 45)

These definitions illustrate that *lian* conceives of “honour” as related to morality and behaviour, which causes a person worthy of respect. According to *mianzi*, on the other hand, honour is related to the social image or reputation obtained based on achievement in certain fields.

As a cultural concept, *mianzi* is closely related to social pride, honour, dignity, reproach, shame, disgrace, humility, trust, distrust, respect and reputation. In social interaction, honour is closely related to the behaviour of individuals that is associated with trust, so is the honour of a country. The country’s honour is obtained or given by its people or other countries, based on their achievement and trust. Since most of the Chinese’s activities are based on “trust”, the fear of “losing face” is more of a psychological than physical burden. The widespread influence of *mianzi* in interactions among the Chinese is reflected in the many expressions that use the word *mianzi*. In this article, two such phrases are used as an analytical framework: *diu mian* (丢面) or “losing face” and *baoquan mianzi* (保全面子) or “saving face”.

*Diu mian* is a phrase that describes the loss of reputation due to reprehensible actions, such as cheating, corruption, infidelity. The Chinese want to avoid *diu mian*. For example, Lucian W. Pye (1992) said that “through a combination of devotion to parents and the fear of losing face, children learn self-discipline, and the Chinese pay attention to this subject more than any other culture” (Jacques, 2011, p. 232). When interacting, one should not make other people or the atmosphere uncomfortable by doing anything that could cause others or partners to “lose face”. This rule often results in an attitude that prioritizes the atmosphere as more important than honesty and truth (Ge and Toomey, 1998, p. 64). Moreover, interlocutors who do not understand Chinese culture well often make uncomplimentary statements or misunderstand the social context. In such situations, the function of the third party as mediator or liaison becomes important. *Baoquan mianzi* or “saving face” is a very closely related expression to *diu mian*. One must actively work to save face in order to avoid losing face. Such efforts of *baoquan mianzi* can also be reflected in the phrase *gu mianzi* (顾面子), which literally means “keeping face”, or paying attention to appearances and behaviours to enhance both dignity and prestige (Ning Yu, 2001).

### 3. The *Tionghoa* between Two Countries’ “Honour”

The *Tionghoa* are in fact an integral part of the history of the Indonesian nation. Their presence in Nusantara (i.e., the Indonesian archipelago) has been

recorded since the Han dynasty (Liang, 2012, p. 5). However, the *Tionghoa* position is often questioned due to their socio-cultural attachment to their ancestral land of China. Furthermore, since the era of dynasties, the Chinese government has implemented regulations to “bind” the *Huaqiao* – including the *Tionghoa* and to claim them as Chinese subjects.

While the *Tionghoa*'s socio-cultural attachment is understandable, suspicion in Indonesian society arises if it is coupled with a political attachment to China. That suspicion often turns into hatred, and in certain circumstances, it has even manifested itself in an anti-*Tionghoa* movement characterized by violence. Suryadinata (2017, pp. 54-55) revealed a number of factors that could trigger the emergence of conflict or anti-*Tionghoa* movement: the economic gap between the *Tionghoa* and indigenous Indonesians, the prejudice that the *Tionghoa* are unfaithful to Indonesia, and the existence of indigenous elites who use the issue of race or ethnic conflict to achieve their political objectives.

Moreover, the *Tionghoa* are expected to act as a “bridge” between Indonesia and China and to serve as a liaison and mediator in order to smooth their relations. Such mediators are especially needed when relations do not go well. In the early era of Indonesia-China relations and during the post-normalization period, several events related to the *Tionghoa* had a major influence on the relations between the two countries – namely, the Wang Renshu case, Presidential Decree Number 10 of 1959, the 30 September Movement events, the normalization of diplomatic relations, and the May 1998 riots. These five events are the focus of this research, particularly in terms of the extent to which the *Tionghoa* can act as a “bridge” that links both nations and countries, especially when ‘honour’ is at stake.

### **3.1. Wang Renshu Case<sup>2</sup>**

On 15 January 1950, Prime Minister Mohammad Hatta sent a cable communicating Indonesia's desire to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC. Although China did not formally reply to the wire until 13 April 1950, shortly thereafter (in May 1950) the PRC appointed Wang Renshu as the first Ambassador to Jakarta to be deployed in August 1950. Immediately after arriving in Jakarta, Wang urged the Indonesian government to allow the reopening of seven consulates of the Republic of China (RoC/Taiwan). The reason for this request was to enable the PRC government to serve the interests of the *Tionghoa*, who were also citizens of China in accordance with articles 37 and 58 of the Common Program,<sup>3</sup> which is the PRC's basic constitutional document and which essentially stipulates that all *Huaqiao* are PRC citizens. It declared that “the PRC government shall provide protection to their personal safety and assets” (Mozingo, 2007, pp. 90-91).

However, the Indonesian government did not accept the request for three reasons: First, the PRC can not automatically take over the assets left by the RoC. Second, the immediate opening of seven consulates in the very early stages of Indonesian-Chinese relations appeared irrational to the Indonesian government. Third, according to the provisions of the Round Table Conference, Chinese descendants born in Indonesia within two years of 27 December 1949 were considered Indonesian citizens, unless he/she personally chooses or has become another citizen (Suryadinata, 1984, p. 117). Especially with regards to the third reason, Indonesia considered the issue of *Tionghoa* citizenship to be relevant only after December 1951. Wang insisted that the consulates were needed to facilitate those who wanted to take care of their *Tionghoa* citizenship (Mozingo, 2007, p. 93). The negotiations were difficult until in March 1951 Indonesia allowed China to open its consulate in four major cities representing the major islands of Indonesia.

However, Wang's move to attract the *Tionghoa* did not stop there. The shift of orientation of the Bank of China from Taiwan to China/PRC was Wang's other success. This move disturbed the Indonesian government, and as a form of protest, on 22 July 1951, Indonesia rejected the arrival of 16 of the 20 PRC embassy staff members who would have been stationed in Indonesia (Mozingo, 2007, p. 98). Furthermore, Indonesia labelled Wang Renshu as *persona non grata* due to his provocation against the United States of America (USA) (Hong, 2011, p. 176).

The Wang Renshu case demonstrated that the PRC government initially tried to "make use of" the *Tionghoa* for its own advantage. However, Indonesia's strong stance showed China that it would be detrimental to PRC if relations with Indonesia deteriorated. Furthermore, it should be remembered that China's international position in the 1950s remained unstable – even isolated – because of the USA's containment policy. In that respect, good relations with Indonesia were crucial for the PRC not only because of the *Tionghoa* but also because of Indonesia's strategic position in relation to the USA. Moreover, if Indonesia took a more decisive action, such as severing relations with China, China would lose face (*diu mian*). The loss of Indonesian trust would make China lose prestige in the eyes of Southeast Asian nations, and make it more difficult to overcome USA containment policies. It would also make China lose the trust and support of the *Tionghoa* and perhaps even the trust and support of the *Huaqiao* in other regions of the world.

Thus, based on its desire to avoid the occurrence of *diu mian*, at the end of 1951, China recalled Ambassador Wang Renshu and replaced him with Huang Zhen. China's decision can be seen as a saving face or *baoguan mianzi*, which not only saved its relations with Indonesia but was also a first step towards better relations. On the other hand, this decision clearly

demonstrates that despite paying significant attention to the *Tionghoa*, when the honour of China was threatened, the PRC government could easily have left the *Tionghoa* behind.

### **3.2. Presidential Decree Number 10 of 1959**

The position of the *Tionghoa* in the relations between the two countries had the potential to improve when it coincided with the Asian-African Conference of 1955, where Indonesia and China signed an agreement on dual citizenship. However, the agreement did not become effective yet. Moreover, Presidential Decree Number 10 of 1959 (PP 10 of 1959/*Peraturan Pemerintah nomor 10 tahun 1959*) banned retail trade in rural areas by foreigners (i.e., the *Tionghoa*) and obliged them to transfer their businesses to Indonesian citizens before 1st January 1960 (Suryadinata, 1984, pp. 140-141). In practice, only the *Tionghoa* were targeted by the regulation, resulting in acts of violence and riots that caused loss of material and casualties. The incident caused tension in Indonesia-China relations because China considered Indonesia to have violated the dual citizenship agreement (Coppel, 1994, p. 84). In fact, under the pretext of protecting the *Tionghoa*, China sent ships to Indonesia to bring (return) the *Tionghoa* to China, and more than 100,000 people gathered to leave Indonesia for China (Suryadinata, 1984, p. 142). Thus, according to Hong (2011, p. 177), Beijing intervened on behalf of its citizens by protesting against the regulations and repatriating 119,000 *Tionghoa* back to China. A research report conducted by the Indonesian Foreign Department and Universitas Sumatera Utara in 1989 revealed that China prepared Hainan island, a power plant, and a budget to accommodate the *Tionghoa* and provide them with employment (R. Tuty, 2015, p. 294).

China was clearly seen using its potential to engage in *gu mianzi* or *zengjia mianzi* or adding face, which was expected to increase its prestige in the presence of the Indonesian government and the *Tionghoa*. Responding to China's attitude, Soekarno's government did not budge, even asserting that Indonesia would not compromise in terms of repatriation. For the *Tionghoa* who wanted to leave Indonesia, the Indonesian government even "forced" them to get out, and they were only allowed to take items they could carry: "Jakarta denied them compensation for their confiscated property and prevented them from leaving the country with their capital and personal belongings" (Mozingo, 2007, p. 174). The *Tionghoa* who came out of Indonesia generally had no capital, and most of them were elderly and thus less productive. This fact, of course, disappointed China, and the event has often been interpreted as the "expulsion" of the *Tionghoa* from Indonesia.

President Soekarno's attitude was a hard blow for China because Soekarno's main supporter was the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI),

which was ideologically the same as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). If the PRC continued to put pressure, it could have backfired. In addition, after learning of the US's role in the 1958 rebellion of *Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia* (PRRI / Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia), China also saw that Soekarno had begun to direct his diplomacy to the Soviet Union (USSR). Nevertheless, since about 1956, tension between the PRC and the USSR had continued to increase. China and the USSR were even competing to develop their sphere of influence, especially in Southeast Asia. In this regard, Indonesia has an important position in Southeast Asia, if Indonesia fell into the USSR's sphere of influence, China would lose face or *diu mian*. Based on that consideration, China immediately stopped the *Tionghoa* repatriation and even encouraged them to comply with all regulations in Indonesia. Chen Yi, Foreign Minister of China at that time stated, "We are willing to maintain friendship with Indonesia, the overseas Chinese problem is just a minor issue and we hope it will not become bigger..." (Hong, 2011, p. 180). This event also showed that China would not lose face or honour just because of the *Tionghoa* problem.

### 3.3. *The Thirtieth of September Movement*

After the case of PP 10 of 1959 was completed, Indonesia-China relations entered a honeymoon era marked by the creation of the Jakarta-Peking axis. But this era lasted only about five years due to the 30 September Movement (G 30 S/*Gerakan 30 September*) in 1965, which led to the death of six army generals. General Soeharto emerged as the leader of Indonesia's New Order, who believed that the G 30 S was driven by the PKI and supported by the PRC. The accusation prompted the PRC to protest loudly, and it even refused to fly the flag at half-mast as a sign of sympathy for the deaths of the six generals. China's uncooperative attitude incited public anger, resulting in an attack on the PRC embassy in Jakarta and subsequently expanding into an anti-*Tionghoa* movement. The *Tionghoa* were the target of anger because they were believed to have supplied funds to the PKI (Suryadinata, 1984, p. 191). On 18 May 1966, Beijing announced that it would send a ship to "fetch" the *Tionghoa* who wanted to leave Indonesia, but only about 10,000 people left (Mozingo, 2007, p. 250). The lack of response from the *Tionghoa* seemed to be related to the conditions in China, where the Cultural Revolution was occurring. On the other hand, it appeared that both governments did not want a mass exodus. China was worried that accepting large numbers of migrants would cause difficulties, while Indonesia feared that an exodus could disrupt stability, especially economically (Coppel, 1994, p. 180).

Although the G 30 S was in fact a political and ideological conflict, the death toll of the *Tionghoa* nevertheless reached about 2,000 (Suryadinata,



2017, p. 56). Moreover, it froze diplomatic relations between Indonesia and China in 1967. At first, China showed superiority, but after seeing that the New Order government did not budge through all its pressure, the PRC realized that its position was on the verge of *diu mian*. The PRC had already reacted negatively to Indonesia's new ruler by not raising a flag at half-mast, by denouncing even strongly protesting mass demonstrations directed against him, and by avenging any attack on PRC representatives in Indonesia by doing the same to Indonesian representatives in Beijing. Moreover, Indonesia made its hostile stance against China clear by its closure and withdrawal of all staff from the Indonesian embassy in Beijing. The Indonesian attitude had caused China to "lose face", thus demonstrating Indonesia's prestige. A week later, China closed and withdrew all its embassy staff from Jakarta and branded the new Indonesian government as fascists. The *Tionghoa* also lost support from China and continued their life in the New Order era as part of the Indonesian nation.

### **3.4. Normalization of Indonesia-China Diplomatic Relations**

The New Order government under President Soeharto came to power for 32 years, for 23 years of which Indonesia had no official relations with China. A number of policies that discriminated against the *Tionghoa* were enacted, including the closing of 698 Chinese schools (Coppel, 1994, p. 135). The *Tionghoa* were directed to totally assimilate with local communities and cultures, including changing their personal names (Coppel, 1994, p. 165). Bureaucracy and politics became barely accessible to the *Tionghoa*, while the economy and trade remained open to them. On the other hand, the government also established "economy as commander" in its development program. This program made the important role of the *Tionghoa* in the New Order economy undeniable because they had the most access to foreign capital, which Indonesia desperately needed at that time. In this respect, the *Tionghoa* contributed to building Indonesia's "honour". However, these developments also encouraged the spread of "*cukongisme*" (Wibowo, 1999, p. 59). The basic word of *cukongisme* is *cukong*, which is a term in the Hokkien dialect that means "boss". *Cukongisme* in this article refers to the practice of collusion, corruption and nepotism that occurs in the New Order era. In that process, some elite of the *Tionghoa* became the boss or *cukong*. The proximity of a number of *Tionghoa* conglomerates with Indonesian officials became a new trigger for anti-*Tionghoa* sentiments in society.

The process of restoring Indonesia-China relations was long and complicated. Individuals and community groups from both countries made attempts at reconciliation beginning in the late 1970s. The approach showed concrete results in 1985 – namely, the achievement of an agreement between

the Indonesian chamber of commerce (*Kamar Dagang Indonesia/KADIN*) and the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) to conduct direct trade. Nevertheless, the full restoration of diplomatic relations was only achieved on 8 August 1990.

In the process of normalizing diplomatic relations, the role of the *Tionghoa* was clear. It was related to the success they achieved, which not only enabled them to become national businessmen but also to play a role in the global economy. The conglomeration they built made it impossible for China to ignore them. It therefore made sense that they were accepted to play a role in restoring the relations, and one of the key figures in this process was Tong Djoe (R. Tuty, 2015, p. 172). The presence and important role of Tong Djoe in the process of restoring relations between the two countries reinforces Ge Gao and Toomey's (1998, p. 64) opinion regarding the concept of *mianzi* – that “the role of mediator or liaison in negotiating with China is very important”. On the other hand, it is an example of the *Tionghoa* playing their role as a “bridge” or a mediator in restoring relations between China and Indonesia.

### 3.5. May 1998 Riots

Normalization of diplomatic relations did not automatically lead to a rapid improvement of Indonesia-China relations. Instead, Indonesia tended to refrain from such improvements, especially in developing political and security relations with China. Multilateral relations were more of an option than bilateral ones, such as through ASEAN or ASEAN Regional Forum. Relations in the economic sector were still limited to the field of trade and investment (Rizal, 2009, p. 143). Indonesia's reluctance to engage in diplomacy cannot be separated from the existence of community groups, including the military, which did not fully support the restoration of diplomatic relations with PRC. In fact, suspicion and sensitivity still colours Indonesia's attitude in dealing with China, especially with regard to the *Tionghoa*.

The position of the *Tionghoa* was relatively more relaxed after diplomatic relations with China were restored. A number of restrictions on allowing *Tionghoa* culture to be publicly expressed began to be relaxed. For example, in 1992 restrictions on importing and circulating printed materials using Han characters were abrogated, schools and courses in the Chinese language were allowed to operate, and since 1993 the *Tionghoa* can openly celebrate Chinese New Year (*Imlek*). The euphoria of the *Tionghoa* cultural performances also spread throughout the country, and the show “*barongsai*” or “lion dance” became one of the most prominent kinds of performance. On the other hand, in line with the increasingly questionable power of the Soeharto regime, economic inequality became a national issue that has the potential to cause

social conflict. With regard to these situation, the *Tionghoa* were the most vulnerable. News showing the wide gap between the *Tionghoa* and natives continued to increase. For example, the *Tionghoa* only composed 3 per cent of the population, but they controlled 70 per cent of the Indonesian economy. Moreover, of the 15 largest corporations, 11 belonged to the *Tionghoa* (Minorities at Risk Project, 2010). The Soeharto government sought to dampen the issue of the gap – for example, by calling for conglomerates to share their shares with cooperatives, to help small companies to exist, and so on.

The efforts of the Soeharto regime did not fully succeed. In April 1994, a labour demonstration in Medan (North Sumatera) developed into anti-*Tionghoa* riots. As a result, a *Tionghoa* businessman was killed, and a number of *Tionghoa*-owned assets were damaged. The PRC reacted strongly to the incident and asked Indonesia to immediately stop the riots. Foreign Minister Ali Alatas responded strongly to China's reaction and said that it was an internal affair of Indonesia and that China did not need to intervene in it (Rizal, 2009, p. 142). The PRC dampened the tension, even when President Jiang Zemin visited Jakarta in November 1994. Jiang also confirmed that "China will never take benefits of the Chinese descendants who live in Indonesia for their economic or political interests". Jiang also added that the PRC government appreciates Indonesia's efforts in simplifying the *Tionghoa* citizenship procedure that exists in Indonesia (Wang Yong, 1994).

Furthermore, China became more cautious when addressing various events involving the *Tionghoa* in Indonesia. From 1995-1998, a number of ethnic-based and religious-based conflicts occurred in various parts of Indonesia in which the *Tionghoa* were affected and even sometimes directly targeted, occurring in Banjarmasin (July 1995), Purwakarta (November 1995), and Pekalongan (November 1995). In subsequent years, conflicts also occurred in Situbondo (1996), Tasikmalaya (1996) and Sulawesi (1997) (Minorities at Risk Project, 2010). With regard to these events, the PRC did not show a strong reaction. This lack of intervention is understandable because the main causes of these conflicts were generally related to popular discontent with the Soeharto regime. China recognized that it needed to be careful because the anti-*Tionghoa* sentiment at that time was primarily related to the "game of politics" in Indonesia before the general election.

President Soeharto was re-elected as the President in March 1998. A monetary crisis that swept the world since 1997 caused Indonesia's economy to worsen: inflation was out of control, unemployment increased dramatically, and the country was unstable. Anti-government mass demonstrations occurred repeatedly in various regions in which anti-*Tionghoa* slogans were central. The peak occurred in May 1998. On 13-15 May, a major riot occurred primarily targeting the *Tionghoa* (Pattirajawane, 2001, p. 213). The violence

that occurred during May 1998 was not just destruction, looting and burning of assets but also rape. Death tolls were more than a thousand people. The incident caused President Soeharto to surrender his position to Vice President B.J. Habibie.

The condemnation of the perpetrators of violence came from inside and outside of Indonesia. Statements or demonstrations demanding that the government should take responsibility were issued from groups of Chinese descent in various countries, such as in Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Australia, and New York. However, it is interesting to note that in China such a movement was not seen, with mass demonstrations at the Indonesian embassy in Beijing only occurring on 17 August 1998. Hughes (2000), who examined nationalism in Chinese cyberspace, found that in the context of the May 1998 event, the Internet provided information about what was happening in Indonesia, and it was a channel for publicizing information about the mass reaction, including the attitude of the authorities to the movement. More importantly, the Internet became a medium for expressing opinions after the Beijing authorities refused permission for mass demonstrations.

The official reaction from Beijing came slowly. Suryadinata (2017, pp. 60-64) found that the earliest reaction came from the PRC Ambassador in Jakarta on 6 July, declaring “regret for the occurrence of the event and he has submitted it to B.J. Habibie in his two meetings”. The comment, however, was the answer to a journalist’s question, not an intentional statement. The first official statement came from the Spokesman of the Foreign Ministry of China on 27 July 1998, followed by the emergence of critical comments in the daily *Renmin Rebao* on 3 August, which demanded that the perpetrators be sentenced. President Jiang Zemin himself, only in November 1998, expressed his regret for the incident to President B.J. Habibie in a meeting of APEC leaders in Malaysia.

The slow response from the PRC can be an indication of caution. Apparently, China did not want to repeat a “mistake” that would make it lose face. Furthermore, China was a rising geopolitical power at that time, and its rapid economic growth and its role in the region since the mid-1990s had increased the trust of ASEAN countries. According to Nabbs-Keller (2011, p. 27), “the political chaos provides an opportunity for a new era in the relations of Indonesia-China, where Beijing has positioned itself brilliantly”. Meanwhile, Shee Poon Kim as quoted by Suryadinata (2017, p. 63) believed Beijing’s attitude of restraint with regard to the Indonesian riots was related to their proximity with the events in Tiananmen on 4 June 1989. China feared that excessive reaction would have triggered a nationalist movement, which could have encouraged the emergence of the “anti-establishment/government movement”. On the other hand, Suryadinata (2017, p. 65) believed that

“Beijing’s hands-off” policy was intended to prioritize its current national interests, such as being more accepted by ASEAN and Indonesia, especially considering its position, which still faced diplomatic isolation after Tiananmen in 1989. From these reasons, it is clear that while defending the *Tionghoa* is important, China considers its national interests as the primary factor affecting its ‘honour’.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This analysis of the five historical events in Indonesia-China relations from 1950-1998 shows the position of the *Tionghoa*, especially from the Chinese point of view. In the early era, the *Tionghoa* were important for China. Therefore, Beijing’s efforts to protect the *Tionghoa* were often direct and emotional. However, such an attitude caused China to risk its “honour”, and thus it took a step “to save face” or *baoquan mianzi*. Conversely, in the post-normalization era, the PRC refrained from addressing issues pertaining to the *Tionghoa*, especially after the events of 1994. China’s refusal to address the events in May 1998 raised many questions. Nevertheless, China has provided assistance to help the Indonesian economy recover.

The position of the *Tionghoa* in China’s view is inseparable from the consideration of various national interests that were a priority of China. In the early era, China was in desperate need of financial support to build its country. Regarding the USA containment policy and China’s hostile relation with the USSR, China could not obtain support from either bilateral or multilateral cooperation. Its communist ideology also became one of the obstacles, causing many countries to be reluctant to get closer to China. As a result, China identified the most likely support as coming from the *Huaqiao* around the world. The sentiments and Chinese solidarity based on the doctrine of “devotion to the ancestors” became a powerful weapon to bind them. In return, the PRC should have protected the *Huaqiao* – including the *Tionghoa* when they were in trouble. However, in the post-normalization era of relations, especially in the mid-1990s, China was in a leading position: the economy was on the rise, and China needed a safe and friendly environment that allowed it to continue building its strength and positive image in the world. In this regard, good relations with Southeast Asia, and especially Indonesia, were crucial. On the other hand, the 1980 PRC nationality law affirmed that China did not recognize dual citizenship; thus, there was no obligation for the PRC to protect Chinese descendants who had become citizens of other countries. China certainly did not want to risk its honour to defend other citizens.

In Indonesia, the emphasis on the role of the *Tionghoa* has historically been in the economic field. Thus their existence was viewed more as an

“economic asset”, especially by the ruling elite of Indonesia. The position as “economic asset” led to the Tionghoa existence and autonomy as part of the Indonesian nation could not be prominent. These condition is partly formed naturally, but the existence of “intentions” is also clearly visible, especially in the New Order era which has issued a number of specific rules regarding the *Tionghoa*. These policies were later identified as discriminatory, and therefore many were abolished in the era of the Reformation. Coupled with the presence of prejudice, stigma and the existence of political elites who used racial and ethnic issues to create state instability as expressed by Suryadinata, the *Tionghoa* often became victims. The position as the “victims” of course would not give the opportunity to become state honour upholders.

Along with current reforms that promote democratization in various fields, the position as the “victims” is now beginning to change. Not only is there no more prohibition to show “contempt” regarding various things, but the *Tionghoa* can now take part in various fields. According to Setiadi (2016, p. 823), in the new era of cooperation and in China’s efforts to put forward its soft power approach in Southeast Asia, the *Tionghoa* individually and through their organizations play an important role as mediators of culture and trade. These developments provided hope for the *Tionghoa* and for other ethnic groups in Indonesia, as well as for both China and Indonesia. The *Tionghoa* can be honoured as bridges that enhance the relations and honour of the two nations, not merely as self-oriented brokers. Nonetheless, that is not an ideal long-term position because it remains overshadowed by the possibility of being “cast aside”, and in certain circumstances it can cultivate “suspicion” toward those who lead to conflict. The right solution for this will take time, goodwill, and sincerity from all parties.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes

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1. For further reading see Collins, Patricia Hill (1998), *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

2. A detailed discussion about this case can be seen in Tuty, Enoch Muas, "Kasus Wang Renshu: Sebuah Kegagalan Diplomasasi RRC terhadap Indonesia", *Paradigma*, Vol. 3, No. 1, December 2012, Depok: FIB UI.
3. Common Program refers to 中国人民政治协会议 共同纲领 (*Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xiehuiyi Gongtong Gangling*/Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference). Adopted by the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's PCC on September 29th, 1949, it was replaced in 1954.

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