

## Chinese Indonesians come full circle

Zakir Hussain (The Straits Times), Asia News Network, Jakarta | Fri, 06/08/2012 11:43 AM

Anew Susanto did not realize he was Chinese until he was in his teens, when some of his secondary school classmates pointed it out and picked on him.

“It was not a good memory,” he recalls. “But I knew this was my country, and I loved it.”

His doctor parents, like many other civil servants under the New Order – the period under then President Soeharto's rule from 1967 to 1998 – had to downplay their ethnicity. But Susanto could not escape from it being a part of how others saw him.

The 34-year-old businessman heads the Chinese-Indonesian Youth Association (IPTI). Late last year, he helped form the Association of Peranakan Tionghoa, which aims to raise awareness of the community's culture and how it has been intertwined with other cultures for centuries.

It is part of an ongoing effort by Chinese Indonesians to talk about their identity and role more openly in a society where a number still cling to misconceptions about the Chinese and their loyalties, years after the state formally banned distinctions between pribumi or indigenous Indonesians and non-pribumi in 1998.

More are also increasingly confident of identifying themselves as Chinese.

In the 2010 census, some 3.7 percent of the population, or 8.8 million people, said they were Chinese, making them the third-largest ethnic group after Javanese and Sundanese, and just ahead of Malays.

Ten years earlier, only 1.2 percent, or 2.4 million people, reported they were Chinese – a fact observers pin down as a legacy of the Suharto years and the 1998 riots involving anti-Chinese violence.

Singapore Management University (SMU) academic Hoon Chang Yau, whose research includes Chinese Indonesians, says: “People have become quite comfortable in the past 10 years, and that's why more Peranakan or Chinese identify [themselves] as such now. There's a sense of pride in being Chinese.”

But there are also concerns that many Indonesians stereotype them as being rich and aloof because they dominate the ranks of the top industrialists, although many struggle to make ends meet like other citizens.

Two new books also aim to show that the community is far from homogenous and shares the same hopes and ea as other Indonesian citizens.

Portraits Of Inspiring Chinese- Indonesian Women, by Aimee Dawis, tells the story of nine leading women role models and how they overcame barriers.

They include badminton star Susi Susanti who, when asked about riots targeting Chinese Indonesians while at a tournament in Hong Kong in 1998, said she was an Indonesian first and foremost and would not hesitate to keep representing her country.

Peranakan Chinese In The Indonesian Archipelago by senior Kompas journalist Iwan Santosa depicts how Chinese Indonesians interact with local communities from Aceh to Papua.

Misperceptions of the Chinese are a legacy of history: In 1965, following a failed coup attempt that was blamed on the communists, scores of ethnic Chinese were killed and had their properties looted and burnt as part of a purge of supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party accused of having close links with China.

The Soeharto regime urged citizens of Chinese descent to take on Indonesian names to prove their loyalty, closed Chinese schools and imposed curbs on celebrating the culture and the learning of Mandarin.

It was only three decades later, following the riots that toppled President Suharto, that these policies were reversed.

Fourteen years on, many Chinese Indonesians are using Mandarin names and learning the language. Chinese schools, newspapers and community organizations are flourishing once more.

Academic Dawis, who teaches communication and cultural studies at the University of Indonesia, believes much of this renewed interest has to do with the rise of China as a political and economic power. However, many are also opting to retain their Indonesianized family names, and giving Mandarin a pass – like Susanto.

“For many now, Chinese names are not cool and difficult to pronounce,” he quips.

Groups like IPTI are also lobbying to include the contributions of Chinese throughout Indonesia's history in school textbooks – to get more of the young to follow suit.

Its 4,000 members in 13 provinces organize blood donations, charity gives and political discussions. Susanto believes Chinese Indonesians must balance their rights with the responsibility to give to society.

But SMU's assistant professor Hoon believes it will take more than 10 or 15 years to clear up misunderstandings.

Susanto is more hopeful, saying: “Chinese have been part and parcel of Indonesia for generations, and much of our food and language evolved from this assimilation and interaction.”



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He adds: "We have been different from the start, but difference is what makes this country united."