# Brief Discussion on Indonesian Overseas Chinese Immigrants from Mainland China to Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s

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## Abstract:

This paper explores the return journey of Indonesian overseas Chinese amidst the anti-Chinese sentiments in Southeast Asia after World War II, focusing on their transition from returning to Indonesia to settling in Hong Kong. It aims to depict the challenging situation faced by the overseas Chinese who returned in the 20th century, caught between their birth country and nationalist sentiments. Despite facing discrimination in language, education, and profession, some Indonesian overseas Chinese in Hong Kong managed to succeed through efforts in establishing trade relations overseas. However, the complexity of their multiple identities presents a challenge. In conclusion, the paper suggests directions for future research on how overseas Chinese can interact with their countries of birth.

## Keywords

Anti-Chinese sentiments in Southeast Asia, Indonesian overseas Chinese, identity recognition

## Introduction

After World War II, there were multiple waves of anti-Chinese sentiment in Southeast Asian countries, leading to the gradual return of many overseas Chinese to their home countries. Particularly in Indonesia, the anti-Chinese phenomenon was pronounced, and a significant majority of returning overseas Chinese were from Indonesia. In the early to mid-1950s, Indonesian repatriates, mainly consisting of students and intellectuals, were primarily arranged to be in schools, focusing on further education and engaging in technical and scientific research. In the 1960s and beyond, most Indonesian repatriates, along with their families, were resettled in overseas Chinese farming communities, engaging in agricultural production. Having experienced the hardships of the three-year famine and the persecution during the Cultural Revolution, a majority of the repatriated overseas Chinese left mainland China in the 1970s and 1980s through exit permits or illegal “escaping to Hong Kong”, seeking a livelihood. Initially, the Hong Kong colonial government attempted to negotiate with Indonesia to allow the stranded Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong to return to Indonesia, but this proposal was rejected by Indonesian authorities. Additionally, there were Indonesian Chinese who, fleeing under the identity of “mainland Chinese,” became residents of Hong Kong. These Indonesian Chinese stayed in Hong Kong, gradually integrating into the local community, and became a significant part of the Southeast Asian Chinese population in Hong Kong.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Hong Kong was dominated by the European and American elite. Indonesian Overseas

Chinese who did not speak Cantonese faced discrimination in their struggle for survival. Their educational qualifications were not recognized, and they encountered obstacles in employment, leading to a challenging life. Despite these difficulties, some Indonesian Overseas Chinese, through their efforts, established trade relations with overseas entities and engaged in business, thereby accumulating wealth. Simultaneously, they reconstructed their community by forming alumni associations and other social organizations, a pattern reminiscent of the earliest Chinese immigrants who engaged in trade and communal living in Southeast Asia. This holds significant reference value for studying the history of overseas Chinese immigration.

## Anti-Chinese Measures in Indonesia and the Situation of Overseas Chinese Returning Home

During the Japanese occupation, the Japanese aimed to establish the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere by suppressing the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia to win the support of the local indigenous population. Subsequently, the political power in Indonesia transitioned from Dutch colonialists to Indonesian nationalists. In this process, whether the locally-born Chinese referred to as "Peranakan" or the new Chinese immigrants referred to as "Totok," both groups experienced unjust treatment. Meanwhile, the establishment of the People's Republic of China ("China") and its series of political, economic, and military achievements greatly stirred up nationalist sentiments among the Chinese. A wave of enthusiasm for learning Chinese swept through the Indonesian Chinese community, and a trend of Chinese nationals returning home began to emerge.

From 1945 to 1954, the Indonesian government adopted the jus soli principle and the "passive policy" in an attempt to naturalize overseas Chinese[1]. According to the 1946 "Citizenship and Residence Regulation of Indonesia" and the 1947 "Indonesian Government Regulation No. 6 of 1947," as well as the Constitution, those born in Indonesia or non-Indonesians who continuously resided in Indonesia for five years, were at least 21 years old or married and did not express refusal to join Indonesian citizenship between April 10, 1946[2], and December 27, 1951, were considered to have chosen Indonesian citizenship. However, until 1954, among the three million overseas Chinese in Indonesia, only 900,000 were passively naturalized, and 2.1 million, accounting for 70%, retained Chinese citizenship. Indonesian authorities believed that the assimilation of the Chinese was difficult and suspected their disloyalty to the Indonesian government. There were concerns about the collaboration between the Indonesian Communist Party and the Chinese Communist Party, even considering the Chinese as the "Fifth Column" for China in Indonesia[3]. Additionally, the rising nationalist sentiment in Indonesia perceived that the business activities of Chinese-Indonesian citizens harmed their interests, leading to a call for reducing the number of foreign-born Indonesian citizens. Therefore, starting in 1954, the Indonesian government implemented an "active policy" on nationality, intensifying the enactment of a series of anti-Chinese laws and policies, restricting Chinese people from acquiring Indonesian citizenship. In 1955, during the Bandung Conference, China and Indonesia signed the "Sino-Indonesian Dual Nationality Agreement," under which Chinese people in Indonesia had to choose between Chinese and Indonesian citizenship. However, the treaty did not take effect until January 20, 1960, after the exchange of ratification documents in Beijing. The nationality issue of Indonesian overseas Chinese was not resolved promptly. From 1942 to 1957, amidst the anti-Chinese sentiments in Indonesian society, the number of "Totok" students attending Chinese schools increased. Simultaneously, in response

to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, some students, teachers, and intellectuals among the overseas Chinese gradually returned to China.

On July 29, 1958, the Indonesian authorities issued Decree No. 62 of 1958, titled "Regarding the Nationality of the Republic of Indonesia," imposing a strict naturalization policy on overseas Chinese[4]. Some overseas Chinese who chose to retain Chinese citizenship faced increasingly severe institutional and legal discrimination. In November 1959, Indonesian President Sukarno issued the famous Presidential Decree No. 10, which mandated that all small-scale and retail enterprises owned by foreign nationals outside provincial and municipal capitals must cease operations by January 1, 1960. On December 9, 1959, Chinese Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Chen Yi wrote to Indonesian Foreign Minister Subandrio, emphasizing the seriousness of the overseas Chinese issue and declaring that, for overseas Chinese who could not make a living or were unwilling to stay in Indonesia, the Chinese government was prepared to repatriate them to China in stages based on the principle of voluntariness[5]. On February 2, 1960, the Chinese government issued the "Instructions of the State Council on Receiving and Settling Returned Overseas Chinese," establishing the Committee for Receiving and Settling Returned Overseas Chinese of the People's Republic of China. In 1960, China received and resettled over 90,000 overseas Chinese who returned from Indonesia. The majority of the returning overseas Chinese were assigned to state-owned Overseas Chinese farms in Guangdong, Fujian, Hainan, Yunnan, Guangxi, and other provinces. Some chose to live with relatives, while young students were enrolled in schools. Thanks to the efforts of the Chinese government, a large number of Indonesian overseas Chinese returned to mainland China. In December 1960, China and Indonesia announced the "Implementation Measures of the Treaty on the Issue of Dual Nationality." In May 1961, China and Indonesia formally began the process of selecting nationality. Throughout this process, the Chinese Embassy and Consulates in Indonesia extensively promoted the "Three Goods" policy among the overseas Chinese, hoping that they would promptly choose a nationality to avoid complications in the relationship between the two countries. During this period around 1960, due to discrimination and exclusion by Indonesian authorities, many overseas Chinese found it difficult to sustain their livelihoods locally, compelling them to choose to return. The estimated number of returnees during this period was around 200,000, with a significant portion coming from families associated with "Peranakan."

In May 1965, the Indonesian government ordered the confiscation of the right of overseas Chinese to handle their property, openly seizing their assets, and anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesian society escalated[7]. On September 30, 1965, the world was shocked by the "September 30th Movement" in Indonesia. Military officers led by the Presidential Guard, including Brigadier General Untung, launched a military coup, arresting six generals, including the Army Commander. However, this coup was suppressed by the Indonesian military led by Suharto. The Suharto group ultimately overthrew Sukarno and aimed to eradicate the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI)[8], which supported Sukarno. Indonesian overseas Chinese were viewed as supporters of the PKI, leading to a large-scale wave of anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesian society. During this period from 1965 to 1966, China suspended diplomatic relations with Indonesia, and a large number of overseas Chinese refugees returned to China. The returnees were mainly ordinary migrants, including small traders, workers, and their families, along with a significant number of primary and secondary school students.

In 1967, after Suharto came to power, he successively implemented many anti-Chinese policies, including

restrictions on Chinese people using Chinese names, prohibition of the use of the Chinese language, closure of Chinese schools and Chinese-language media, dissolution of Chinese associations, mandatory name changes for all Chinese individuals, abandonment of Chinese culture and customs, and promotion of the conversion of Chinese people to Islam. However, in 1966, when the Cultural Revolution began in China, the domestic political environment changed rapidly. On one hand, overseas Chinese became an unwelcome group in China, and the government no longer actively arranged for the return of overseas Chinese; on the other hand, the returning Indonesian Chinese faced political oppression due to their "overseas background" and experienced unfair treatment in various aspects of life, education, and work, once again falling into difficulties.

## The Detention of Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong

In the early days, many returnees, after experiencing three years of famine, left China shortly after complaining about the lack of educational opportunities and food shortages, with the brief permission of the Chinese government. In 1962, about 20,000 returnees left China and came to Hong Kong[9]. After 1963, the Chinese government once again tightened control over residents leaving the country, and few could legally leave China. After the Cultural Revolution, due to "overseas relations," returnees were politically oppressed, and large numbers of overseas Chinese were subjected to labor reform, facing difficult lives. "After November 1970, with the repeated inquiries from Premier Zhou Enlai and for the benefit of overseas Chinese, the country began to relax its exit policies for returnees, and there was a sharp increase in applications from returnees to go abroad."[10] In 1972, President Nixon visited China, and China and the United States broke the isolation. Subsequently, the Chinese government further relaxed restrictions on the departure of returnees from China. Since then, overseas Chinese could obtain exit permits through "inheritance of heritage" and other "overseas relations." A large number of overseas Chinese left mainland China to make a living in Hong Kong. Some Indonesian Chinese also attempted to return to Indonesia or go overseas to join relatives through Hong Kong.

Due to the tens of thousands of Indonesian Chinese who were detained in Hong Kong, in June 1974, the British government attempted to discuss the issue of "legitimate refugees" with Indonesia, but the Indonesian authorities refused to accept their return. The British government hoped that China would reduce the approval of those leaving the country; however, the Chinese government believed that from 1965 to 1971 during the Cultural Revolution, very few individuals were formally approved to leave, and it could not stop normal approvals. In addition, the Chinese government also understood that those returning to Indonesia through Hong Kong would have difficulty being accepted by the Indonesian government. Therefore, they tacitly agreed to reduce the approval of those emigrants who might end up staying in Hong Kong[11].

On March 9, 1978[12], the Hong Kong Commercial Daily reported that the British Hong Kong government attempted to issue a special document to prove the identity of former Indonesian immigrants who were stranded in Hong Kong, aiming to assist their return to Indonesia. However, such documents already existed, and subsequently, the Hong Kong Immigration Department made the following clarification: "Anyone unsuitable for obtaining a passport can obtain an affidavit through their lawyer to prove their identity and apply for outbound travel from the Immigration Department. However, whether to obtain an entry visa still

depends on the approval of the relevant country." Unfortunately, the Indonesian government still did not consider changing its policy toward Indonesian Chinese immigrants and stated, "Those who voluntarily returned to mainland China in the 1960s and later applied to leave due to difficulties adapting and disappointment with life on the mainland, resulting in staying in Hong Kong, are their problems." In addition, the report also pointed out that 92 overseas Chinese who attempted to return to Indonesia using forged travel documents have been arrested by Indonesian authorities and charged with illegal entry. On September 12, 1978, the Hong Kong Commercial Daily reported that nearly three million overseas Chinese in Indonesia had completed registration. After registration, all Indonesian overseas Chinese, including the native-born, had to choose their nationality, either Indonesian or Chinese. Those willing to naturalize would obtain legal documents[13]. However, due to the fluctuating nature of Indonesia's policies toward the Chinese, Indonesian authorities continued to accuse overseas Chinese of spreading communist ideology, maintaining that the "yellow peril" still posed a threat to Indonesia's security[14], and anti-Chinese sentiments continued to resurface intermittently.

In the 1980s, the Indonesian government made some adjustments to its Chinese policy, providing a relatively stable living environment for local Chinese Indonesians. However, Indonesian Chinese who were stranded in Hong Kong continued to face unresolved issues. Unable to secure a formal return to Indonesia, many of these stranded Indonesian Chinese resorted to illegal means to return to Indonesia. Reports indicated that 3,000 stranded Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong attempted to return to Indonesia clandestinely, and 38 of them were arrested by Indonesian authorities. Additionally, as of 1980, there were still tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese in Jakarta who had not completed the process of national registration[15].

In the early to mid-1980s, with concerns arising from the Sino-British negotiations over Hong Kong's future, some Indonesian Chinese residents in Hong Kong, fearing the potential implications, once again attempted to return to Indonesia illegally. The Indonesian Consulate in Hong Kong also expressed concerns about the possible illegal return of the one hundred thousand Indonesian Chinese residing in Hong Kong in light of the impending handover in 1997[16]. Despite these circumstances, the Indonesian government continued to reject the repatriation of Indonesian Chinese from Hong Kong. As a result, at least 100,000 Indonesian Chinese remained stranded in Hong Kong without obtaining permission to return to Indonesia.

## Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong

Whether arriving in Hong Kong through legal channels or employing illegal means under the "touch-base policy" [17] to become legal residents with the assistance of this policy, Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong are identified solely as "mainlanders." For them, the term "overseas Chinese" cannot be used, as the Hong Kong colonial government does not grant this status as permanent residents and requires overseas Chinese to return to their place of origin upon the expiration of their travel documents. Consequently, when entering Hong Kong, they can only identify themselves as Chinese, born on the mainland [18]. Of course, compared to Indonesia, they no longer face issues related to anti-Chinese sentiment and nationalism. Compared to mainland China, they are spared from the hardships of life and political persecution. For them, the pressing question is how to make a living in Hong Kong.

Indonesian Chinese, upon arriving in Hong Kong, found themselves presented with numerous employment opportunities due to the thriving industrial sector in the region. Simultaneously, the openness and freedom in Hong Kong provided them with opportunities to engage with the external world and the freedom to form associations. With the help of relatives and friends, they quickly stabilized in Hong Kong, re-establishing contact with relatives and friends both locally and abroad and organizing themselves through various means. On the other hand, like new immigrants from the mainland, they also experienced discrimination and neglect in Hong Kong. In the 1970s and 1980s, Hong Kong was primarily dominated by Europeans, particularly the British, at the top of the social hierarchy. With the majority being Cantonese-speaking locals, Indonesian Chinese faced difficulties integrating into mainstream society due to language barriers and cultural differences. The dual discrimination from both Europeans and the local community was particularly pronounced for Indonesian Chinese from the mainland. [19] While their native language was Indonesian, and despite receiving education in Mandarin in mainland China, adapting to the Cantonese and English-speaking environment in Hong Kong required them to relearn Traditional Chinese characters and English to fit into the linguistic and cultural milieu of Hong Kong.

When the Indonesian Chinese initially left Indonesia, they had already renounced Indonesian citizenship, and the Indonesian authorities did not allow them to return. Faced with China, they experienced political persecution due to their "overseas connections," making them reluctant to go back. Therefore, upon arriving in Hong Kong, they had to overcome difficulties and persevere. Unfortunately, the British colonial government did not recognize mainland Chinese qualifications, only acknowledging those from British territories, making it challenging for them to find suitable employment and utilize their skills. Many young overseas Chinese who returned from Southeast Asia in the 1950s and 1960s had relatively high levels of education, with an average educational background of secondary school and above. Some were university graduates, and a few were advanced intellectuals, doctors, and scientists. When they first arrived in Hong Kong, most women worked in garment factories or electronics factories, while men worked in plastic factories. They were limited to engaging in low-skilled manual labor and service industries such as domestic work and security services, earning a living by providing various services. Of course, some individuals contributed to Hong Kong's development. "In the booming light industry of Hong Kong in the 1970s, almost every factory had returnees from the mainland as technical personnel. These individuals not only had technical skills but were also familiar with the mainland situation, naturally becoming pioneers in the internal migration of Hong Kong's industry." [20]

Some Indonesian Chinese, through their efforts, chose to engage in trade to make a living. In Hong Kong, overseas Chinese were involved in trade, primarily because they had personal connections both domestically and internationally. They had relatives and friends abroad while also establishing relationships for study, life, and work in their home country. They connected domestic and international trade, engaging in re-export trade, which at one point contributed to making Hong Kong a hub for re-export trade. Of course, residents in Hong Kong were also involved in domestic and international trade, but overseas Chinese became more familiar with the mainland more quickly and entered the trade industry earlier, exerting a more profound influence. As an immigrant community, the trade industry became a distinctive professional characteristic for overseas Chinese.

Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong also had to face political uncertainties. For example, in the early to mid-1980s, as China underwent economic reforms and the Hong Kong handover issue became a topic for

discussion between China and the UK, Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong were filled with concerns about the future. Some felt uneasy because they were unsure whether the political environment after the handover would have a negative impact on them. Some were concerned about the continuity of their businesses after the handover and whether they would face political interference. As a result, some individuals resorted to illegal means to return to Indonesia.

However, aside from grappling with issues of survival and development in Hong Kong, Indonesian Chinese also had to confront questions about their identity. They were labeled as "Indonesians," "Mainland people," or "Overseas Chinese," requiring them to navigate challenges related to multiple identity affiliations. In terms of racial identity, Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong never denied their Chinese heritage. However, due to being born overseas and having a mixed cultural background, whether in mainland China or Hong Kong, they were often perceived as not entirely Chinese or at least not "pure" Chinese. "But as for their ultimate identity, they cannot say definitively where they belong, perhaps placing more emphasis on their family life."

Due to language barriers and unrecognized qualifications, many Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong faced challenges in employment and experienced discrimination and unfair treatment in their daily lives. These difficulties brought them closer together, leading to the formation of a cohesive community where they could build a sense of home. As Hong Kong's social life gradually stabilized in the 1970s and 1980s, the local Chinese community initiated the establishment of various associations for socializing and mutual assistance. Among the earliest formed Chinese associations were "Su Dao Ai Qun Dao" (in the 1970s), "Hong Kong Qiao You She" (1982), and "Hong Kong Ji Mei Xiao You Hui" (1982). Subsequently, more organizations like "Ma Zhong Lu Gang Ao Xiao You Lian Hui" (1986) and "Ju Gang (Hong Kong) Xiao You Hui" were established.

These associations actively worked to reshape the network of connections among Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong. Through various activities organized by alumni associations, such as artistic performances, dances, music, and showcases of Indonesian cuisine, they showcased their cultural identity, strengthened internal communication, and fostered unity. These associations continue to be important components for maintaining the spiritual home of Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong. Interestingly, Indonesian Chinese rarely joined regional or dialect-based hometown associations. Even those with roots in Guangdong and who spoke Cantonese did not necessarily identify with local hometown associations. Instead, they preferred to participate in alumni associations, whether it was the "Ju Gang Alumni Association" for those who studied in Indonesia or the "Ji Mei Alumni Association" for those who studied in China. Hong Kong, being an immigrant society, meant that place of birth or ancestral origin may no longer be their identity labels. Their unique experiences became their collective memory and the distinctive identity marker that they emphasized the most.

## Conclusion

Indonesian Chinese experienced a tumultuous journey of repatriation in the 1950s and 1960s. Amid the drastic political and economic changes in China during the 1960s and 1970s, most individuals left mainland China and eventually settled in Hong Kong. Faced with the challenges of the new environment in Hong

Kong, identity issues, and the impending return of Hong Kong to China, Indonesian Chinese had to make new choices. Unable to obtain approval from the Indonesian government, some resorted to illegal means to return to Indonesia, while the majority continued to struggle for survival in Hong Kong. Through the narrative in this article, an attempt is made to portray the dilemma of the repatriated Chinese in the 20th century. They found themselves caught between their country of birth and nationalistic sentiments, burdened with multiple identities that were challenging to navigate. Regardless of their location, they were often perceived as "others" and subject to restrictions imposed by local policies. Among the repatriates, intellectuals, represented by students, harbored idealistic aspirations, abandoned their birthplace nationality, and dedicated themselves to building their envisioned ideal nation. However, the vast majority of repatriates, influenced by anti-Chinese sentiments in Southeast Asia, faced difficult lives and, after enduring the hardships of three years of famine and the Cultural Revolution, ultimately chose to emigrate once again. For overseas Chinese, the seemingly only way forward was to abandon their "other" identity early on, acquire citizenship in the host country, and fully integrate into the local society. Between 1945 and 1954, the Indonesian government implemented jus soli and a "passive nationality" policy, providing a window of opportunity for Chinese integration into Indonesian society. If the majority of Indonesian Chinese relinquished their Chinese citizenship and actively assimilated into local society during this period, could it have prevented issues similar to the later widespread anti-Chinese sentiments in Indonesian society? This could be a direction worthy of further research.

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