

A SHORT HISTORY OF ANTI-CHINESE RIOTS

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Indonesia has yet to experience a peaceful transfer of power. There have been four major periods of political change, all of which have impacted on the ethnic Chinese. These were: the Japanese occupation (1942-1945); revolution and independence (1945-1949); the September 30 Incident and what followed (1965-1967); and, now, the recent events of May, 1998, which brought an end to Soeharto's New Order. Each time, social unrest appeared in the process of a power shift, with riots happening in different places in the archipelago, especially on Java and Sumatra. We know that rioting is contagious and can, potentially, extend over a wide area. But scholars have not, as yet, devoted enough attention to the phenomenon or adequately explained why the Chinese have so often been the victims. Although the particular causes or incidents behind anti-Chinese violence have undeniably varied from location to location -- and much more research needs to be done -- there does seem to be an overall pattern worth exploring.

INTRODUCTION

Riots fall somewhere between war and crime and can be extremely hard to explain. The ones that occurred during the French Revolution, in Tokugawa Japan, or as part of the American civil rights struggle are widely regarded as turning points in the history of those countries. They are a form of collective violence carried out by people who have been mobilized by circumstances and underlying grievances not always clear to the participants at the time. They can be grouped by immediate cause (when known), the rioters (when an easily defined group -- soldiers, peasants, workers or minorities), the deeper issue (for example: hunger, poverty, inflation, discrimination or revenge) as well as by results (property destruction, deaths, or overthrown rulers). As with those elsewhere, the riots that have taken place in Indonesia have their own, uniquely complicated, socio-economic and political dynamic which needs to be understood. They may appear 'anti-Chinese' at a superficial level and yet involve a whole range of other factors and motivations, which may turn out to be more far important in the long run than the incidents that sparked them. Some may be religious or anti-governmental at heart and really have nothing at all to do with race yet, in spilling over to affect Chinese, have profound consequences for ethnic relations. It is, in fact, still far too early to draw firm conclusions about the 1998 riots. After all, their ultimate historical significance may go far beyond the events themselves or their immediate causes.²

Because the mainstream concern of Indonesian studies has been so profoundly coloured by nationalism, the so-called 'Chinese problem' (*masalah Cina*) has traditionally been seen as a question of national intergration (Sukisman, 1975; Hidayat, 1976, etc.) Since the Chinese are seen as unintegrated, they caused the problem and, by extension, the riots. But it has not been possible to challenge this proposition or

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investigate further. Precisely because they touch on so many sensitive issues, including ethnic relations, the study of anti-Chinese riots has remained off limits to Indonesian scholars and been avoided by foreigners.³ This may be one possible reason why, unlike other nations in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has not solved the so-called 'Chinese problem'. But, with the promise of more democracy has come more freedom of speech. Graphic details have now appeared in the mass media, no doubt making future research that much easier. Historians have long recognized that the study of riots (*kerusuhan* in Indonesian) is important. They reflect significant social contradictions and can involve many deeper issues: politics, race relations, class, the economy, colonialism, globalization or even world views. Be this as it may, the story of anti-Chinese riots undeniably constitutes a critical chapter in Indonesia's modern history. Almost every major political change has involved them. As an unavoidable theme in modern Indonesian history, they must be better understood before we can really comprehend the mechanism of political change.

THE PATTERN TO ANTI-CHINESE RIOTS

Thus far, there have been four major episodes involving anti-Chinese rioting. The first took place during the early stages of the Japanese occupation. These happened mainly on Java, after Japanese soldiers had landed but before they really controlled the island. The second period was during the Indonesia Revolution, 1945-1949. The third period was after the '930' incident, from 1965-1967.⁴ For the purposes of this paper, the fourth period begins with the Medan riots of 1994, some four years before Soeharto stepped down. Otherwise, it could be said to have started with the destabilizing economic collapse of 1997 through the May 1998 violence which has prompted this conference. This period will be referred to as 'late New Order'. The four major periods of ethnic unrest will be discussed in order. What is important to note at the outset is that all four waves involved periods of power transition.

Some studies have noted riots that happened earlier than 1942. For example, Leo Suryadinata reported the outbursts of violence in Solo and Surabaya in 1912 and Kahin reported riots in Koedoes in 1918.⁵ However, I would argue that those events were highly localized, involving conflict between particular groups in fairly unique circumstances. They were not 'contagious' (if that is the proper word). For example, the Koedoes Incident in 1918, which resulted in 11 Chinese businessmen killed and many houses burnt, resulted from a conflict between Chinese and Muslim merchants. The violence seems not to have spread further, as would happen in 1942, 1946-1948, 1965-1967 and 1998: the time periods emphasized in the following pages.

Most works consider the anti-Chinese riots that happened during the Indonesian Revolution as the first in modern times. Among them, the Tangerang riots of 1946 are the most famous. There were 656 Chinese killed in this event at the outskirts of Jakarta. More serious riots occurred after the September 30 incident in 1965. Then, mobs angry at Communist China, which was allegedly behind a coup attempt by the Indonesian

³The major exception is the important study by J.A.C. Mackie (1976).

⁴There was, of course, other anti-Chinese violence in the New Order. But they were isolated events which do not seem to have spread.

⁵See Suryadinata (1981), p. 24. and George McTurnan Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961(1952)), p. 67.

Communist Party (PKI), turned on local Chinese. The initial violence spread to many places. No one knows all the unpleasant details. This paper is particularly concerned with those riots which, like those of May 1998, appear to have been contagious or happened over a fairly short period of time and over a wide geographical area; often including more than one island. Those that happened in the early stages of the Japanese occupation fall into this category. Although there were undoubtedly small-scaled ethnic conflicts between Chinese and *pribumi* in Java before this time, they did not trigger other events.

Japanese Occupation

The anti-Chinese riots of March 1942 happened after Dutch administrators were evacuated, just after Japanese soldiers had landed but before they were in full control. Indeed, the riots were quite widespread on Sumatra and Java at a time when these islands were deprived of virtually all law and order. Many Chinese shops and factories were looted. In some instances, the looting may have actually been initiated by fleeing Dutch soldiers. In other cases, the doors of warehouses and factories were initially broken open by Japanese soldiers. In either case, Chinese property became an easy target for thieves. The loss was estimated at least 100 million East Indies dollars while the total casualty list remains unknown.⁶

A story has been related in Tan Kah Kee's memoir. In Batavia (now Jakarta), a *peranakan* family with seven family members was robbed by hundreds of *pribumi*. As a result of the landlord having two guns, looters surrounded them but dared not get too close. The servant stood aside and offered to help. The landlord passed his guns to this servant, but servant then turned the gun toward his employer. The landlord was surprised and said 'You have worked for me for more than twenty-two years. Why do you want to betray me?' The servant answered 'today is a good opportunity for me'. He then killed the landlord. Five other family members also died and all their goods were stolen.⁷

Chinese leaders later agreed that Japanese soldiers encouraged Indonesian *pribumi* to loot shops. They wrote of how surprised they were and that such violence toward Chinese had been unprecedented under the Dutch. There was no sign of anti-Chinese sentiment among *pribumi* in Java before the Japanese arrived.⁸ Baren discussed this situation with some Indonesian youths in 1942 and those youth confirmed that the Japanese did encourage them to rob Chinese shops at the beginning when Japanese landed on the islands.⁹ William H. Frederick's work confirmed that some looting of Chinese property was encouraged directly by the Japanese.¹⁰ Other thefts might well have been inspired by knowledge that the Chinese were considered hostile to the new rulers since China was at war with Japan.¹¹ Therefore anti-Chinese actions were justified.

⁶There is little contemporary material available for these events but, fortunately, first-hand accounts began to appear in Chinese-language works after the war.

⁷Chen Jia Gen (Tan Kah Kee), *Nan qiao hui yi ru (Memoir of an Overseas Chinese in the South)* (Singapore: Nanyang Yishuashe, 1946), p. 425.

⁸*Kung Yung Pao*, 1, April 1942.

⁹Baren, *Yinni Sangi* [Notes on Indonesia] (1948), p. 77.

¹⁰H. Frederick William, 'Indonesian Urban Society in Transition: Surabaya, 1926-1946'. Unpublished PhD. thesis, University of Hawaii (1978), p. 351.

¹¹*Kung Yung Pao*, 17 March 1942.

The Japanese changed their policy after they controlled the situation and soon set firm rules with severe punishments for infringement. Chinese residents welcomed the end of chaos for they could not live in such conditions of anarchy. There were some other aspects of the nature of the riots. As a Japanese survey suggested that a religious factor was also involved.¹² After the riots in which poor *pribumi* robbed Chinese shops and burned Chinese houses, a Japanese scholar examined the reason why the rioters did not attack the Arab people in Java. In terms of the feeling of superiority, both ethnic Chinese and ethnic Arabs had similar attitudes toward *pribumi*. In terms of the economic relationship, both ethnic Chinese and ethnic Arabs were seen as exploiters of *pribumi*. But there were no such riots toward the Arabs at that time. The conclusion of this survey suggested that religion played an important role. Arabs were seen as Muslim brothers by *pribumi*. Some cases even indicated that Arabs encouraged them to rob Chinese shops as part of the economic competition between Arabs and Chinese.

The Japanese army later established law and order only when they controlled the whole island of Java. But the events of March 1942 introduced large-scale anti-Chinese rioting to modern Indonesia. Although their duration was very short, the effects have proven to be long lasting. As I have explained elsewhere (Yang, 1998), the Japanese military administration ignored the difference between *totok* and *peranakan*. They took the view 'once a Chinese always a Chinese' and put Chinese people born in China and people of Chinese descent in the same category, *kakyo*, the Japanese pronunciation of the characters for *huaqiao*. The Japanese also criticized the *peranakan* for not being able to read or write the Chinese language. They asked the *peranakan* to send their children to Chinese schools. This accelerated their re-sinicization. When the Japanese military administration required all Chinese people to register, many *peranakan* could not give their names in Mandarin. The Japanese administrators then asked them to write their names down. But many *peranakan* could not write Chinese characters. Usually the Japanese administrators kicked them or struck them several blows and criticized them, saying 'You are Chinese, how can you not speak Chinese?' or 'You are Chinese, how can you not write Chinese?'¹³ Many *peranakan* were affected by this humiliation and then tried to learn the Chinese language. Many even sent their children to Chinese schools after the end of the war. The distance between *peranakan* (or *baba* in Malaya) and *totok* was clearly reduced as a result of the Japanese policy of viewing the Chinese people as a whole.

Under the Japanese, the fates of Chinese *peranakan* and *totok* immigrants became far more closely tied together. Distinctions once recognized by the Dutch colonial system, as well as *pribumi* perceptions on their neighbours, became confused: even practically meaningless. Moreover, the two 'Chinese' groups now had more reason to interact. They realized that, in the eyes of the Japanese, they belonged in the same category and would be treated the same way. Not only was their property targeted in the scorched earth policy, giving a legitimacy to latent anti-Chinese sentiment, but Japanese perceptions encouraged *pribumi* Indonesians to treat all ethnic Chinese, including *peranakan*, with many generations of residence, as 'outsiders'.

¹²Osamu Shudan Shireibu, *Zen Jawa Kaikyo Jokyo Chosasho* [Survey on the Situation of Islam in Java] (1943), p. 355.

¹³Qiu Xinmen, *Zhao nan shi dai shi hua* [The History of the Shonan Era] (Singapore: Qingnian Press, 1993).

The Independence Struggle

A second wave of violence occurred during the struggle for independence, 1945-1949. Not surprisingly, the most-significant events took place in areas of Java and Sumatra which were being actively contested by Dutch and Indonesian forces. Although this was a time of considerable uncertainty, the consequences were quite well documented by investigators from both armies and independently substantiated by diplomats representing the Republic of China in Batavia and Medan. In total, some 3,000 Chinese were killed;¹⁴ over 600 of these, including 130 women, in Tangerang in June 1946, which became an international incident. Other riots occurred at Bagansiapiapi in September 1946 and in Palembang in January 1947. These and other major outbreaks of anti-Chinese violence by *pribumi* are compared below:

1945/11/10	Surabaya	58 dead, 13 injured, 1 missing 43 buildings destroyed
1946/03/23	Bandung	54 dead, 50 injured, 36 missing, 5020 buildings destroyed
1946/6/11	Tangerang	656 dead, 496 injured, 403 missing, 3409 buildings destroyed
1946/9/18	Bagansiapiapi	239 dead, 52 injured
1947/1/1	Palembang	256 dead, 114 injured, 594 missing, 3060 buildings destroyed
1947/7/20	1st police action	
	Java Timur	164 dead, 50 injured, 165 missing, 1849 arrested
	Java Barat	83 dead, 18 injured, 52 missing, 7233 arrested
	Java Tengah	406 dead, 8 injured, 78 missing, 6559 arrested
	Sumatra	196 dead, 92 injured, 78 missing, 89 arrested
1947/12/19	2nd police action	
	Jambi	7 dead, 5 injured, 2 missing, 389 buildings destroyed
	Java	757 killed, 89 injured, 9221 arrested
	Sumatra	26 dead, 18 injured, 52 arrested

The table begins with the *Peristiwa Surabaya* of November 1945, after Indonesian and English troops had come into conflict and the loyalties of ethnic Chinese toward the returning Dutch were suddenly suspect. But it needs to be noted that 6315 Indonesians died in the resulting violence compared to fewer than 60 Chinese. It is difficult to say whether their deaths should be included. Moreover, it also needs to be noted that the riots in Bandung seem to have been directed largely at property. Although all of the events can be related to the independence struggle, they do not seem to have been part of a deliberate policy. Rather, they were carried out by *pribumi* in areas where Dutch

¹⁴See Yu Shukun (ed.), *Nanyang Nianjian* [South Seas Year Book] (Singapore, 1951).

authority was weak or absent and, later, in the context of various police actions, when there were few republican elements around. Perhaps it was their intention to cause maximum disruption. But given the context of the times, the force of anti-colonial sentiments, and all of the international complications, it is difficult to say to what extent the violence or property destruction was specifically anti-Chinese. Although Chinese-language sources naturally emphasize the racial character of the riots, it must be acknowledged that *pribumi* undoubtedly suffered more, *per capita*, in the revolution.

30 September Incident and its Aftermath

The precise number of people killed in the wake of the anti-Communist coup of 1965, which ultimately brought Soeharto to power and involved human slaughter on a mass scale (Cribb, 1990 and Griswold, 1969), is still uncertain. Common estimates of the total dead range from 500,000 to 1,000,000. There is no question that Chinese died, although their percentage of the total has long been exaggerated. Most of the killing took place at the village level where leftists (or those perceived to be pro-communist) were rounded up and killed. Although political and racial motives are still difficult to differentiate, the violence soon took on a more overtly 'anti-Chinese' character, spreading from Java and Sumatra to the outer islands (see the standard work on the subject by Mackie, 1976). Anti-Chinese rioting can be said to have ranged from large, public, demonstrations in major urban areas, including those in front of the embassy of the People's Republic of China in Jakarta, to isolated incidents of savagery. The violence in West Kalimantan in 1967 was notoriously brutal involving first Dayaks and then the Indonesian Army (see Rakindo, 1975). Furthermore, the 'New Order' government quickly turned on Chinese schools and newspapers, together with prominent organizations (such as BAPERKI) and their leaders: clearly giving the impression that 'Chineseness' was an evil to be eliminated (see Coppel, 1983). All this was, of course, further complicated by the 1959 Presidential Decree banning Chinese traders from rural areas and the tricky, not yet completely resolved, questions about citizenship: made worse by the breakdown of relations with the PRC. A Chinese-language source estimated that, from October 1965 through the change of government in 1967, the period of greatest political instability, as many as 100,000 perished. Many others left the country. Only one thing seems certain: the Chinese, and especially merchants, had been largely the victims of factors beyond their control, caught as they were between communism and *pribumi* nationalism, the People's Republic of China and the Indonesian military.

The Late 'New Order'

The recent wave of anti-Chinese violence might be said to have begun in Medan in 1994, at a time when the Soeharto regime still appeared firmly in power. There a workers' protest spilled over into riots, which resulted in the destruction of shops: though it needs to be added that many of the employees were ethnic Chinese. Moreover, there was an obvious connection between economic grievance and ethnic scapegoating. This was followed by the '727' incident of July 27 1996, when after the government cracked down on the PDI, riots happened all around Jakarta and many Chinese shops were targeted (see Luwarso, 1997; Sutarno, 1997). Unrest of a different sort broke out between Muslims and Christians at Situbondo in September 1996 and at Taksikmalaya in December – though there may well have been a perceived 'Chinese' connection. More overtly anti-Chinese violence took place at Rengasdengklok on New Year's Day 1997. In response to the murder of a Muslim girl by a Chinese youth in Unjung

Pandang, Sulawesi, some 62 premises were burnt and over 1000 damaged in September 1997. And there was frightful ethnic conflict at Sanggau Ledo in West Kalimantan. Although not anti-Chinese, it broke out in an area of growing Chinese migration and greatly worried the Chinese community there. Smaller incidents occurred in Tanah Abang on 1 January 1997 and at Pekalongan in March. By the end of the year, Chinese property was under attack in many locations because of price rises and the rapidly collapsing Indonesian economy. Before long, the entire country was experiencing various degrees of unrest which culminated in the student demonstrations of May 1998 and large-scale outrages against the Chinese community.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The four waves of riots in modern Indonesian history described above can be seen to have had some common characteristics. First, every period when there was persistent and/or widespread rioting coincided with a time of political transformation. Their history not only reminds us that Indonesia has yet to have a smooth transfer of power but also suggests that ethnic tensions and other pent-up grievances are released during such periods. From the early stages of the Japanese occupation to Soeharto's resignation, political change has been accompanied by violence that has affected the Chinese community. Borrowing from the Middle Kingdom's own historical experience, such unrest has long been a feature of dynastic change. Everyone knows the old curse: 'may you live in interesting times'! All the riots described in this paper occurred in fragile periods of political uncertainty when ethnic Chinese were placed in a vulnerable or disadvantageous position. Although it is impossible to ignore the considerable, and always unfortunate, loss of life, the main losses in anti-Chinese outbreaks, over the years studied, have been largely property. Chinese casualties are not really disproportionate when compared with other ethnic groups or even with what has been suffered by *pribumi* Indonesians in similar crisis situations. Thus, it is hard to conclude that rioting is *ipso facto* a racially-motivated phenomenon or that there is a deep hatred of the Chinese.

We need to appreciate that ethnic relations have changed over time. The situation has been different, as well as the socio-political context, in each period studied: as it is today when the transfer of power has been complicated not by invasion or revolution but by the Asian economic meltdown and its ramifications. What has not changed in the post-independence period is the basic characteristics of the political system. As the Ambassador said, the so-called 'Chinese problem' really is an Indonesian problem. Besides issues related to democracy, the development of a genuinely civil society, and the need for tolerance in a pluralistic nation, there is the question of persistent violence. After the May 1998 riots, accompanied as they were by burning, looting, and raping, many observers remembered the earlier episodes and thought that they saw similarities. But has there really been a discernible pattern? And, if so, when can it be said to have first emerged? Most reports only looked at events after the Indonesian Declaration of Independence of August, 1945. But my own PhD research suggests that we need to go back to the Japanese occupation, when *peranakan* and *totok* were lumped together by policy and propaganda, to begin to understand what has happened.

It should go without saying that the Chinese easily become victims, indeed scapegoats, in times of social turmoil. One possible explanation is that they are seen to represent the old, outgoing, regime: though they could hardly be said to have been pro-Japanese. They were, however, widely viewed as pro-Dutch during the Japanese occupation and subsequent independence struggle and were, rightly or wrongly, victimized by Indonesian nationalism. The same thing happened later, when the main contest in the political arena was the struggle between the Communist party (PKI) and the military. Then, Chinese communities were seen as pro-communist or leftist, despite their true political feelings and the economic success many enjoyed. Given the winner-take-all nature of Indonesian politics after 1949, the Chinese have, time after time, found themselves identified with the losing side. One can take a similar view of the situation in the 1990s. This time, they were closely identified with the unpopular Soeharto government. Moreover, structural factors also need to be taken into consideration. But the real question remains why Chinese people become such easy targets? If we look at individual incidents, the reasons behind the riots vary considerably. It is not always easy to understand how a labour disagreement, political demonstration, or religious conflict can turn against the Chinese. Conversely, if we consider only individual events, it is sometimes easier to 'blame the victim'. For example, if there is anti-Chinese rioting, then the gap between the rich and the poor must, obviously, be the reason. To reduce tensions, the Chinese are then, ironically, forced to retreat back into their own community for protection and/or to pay 'compensation' of one sort or another, whilst also 'donating' still more money to the authorities. The victim was wrong and the mob, thereby, excused. This only encourages repeat performances.

