CHAPTER FOUR

DIVERSITY IN COMPLIANCE:
YOGYAKARTA CHINESE AND THE
NEW ORDER ASSIMILATION POLICY

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Introduction

As described in more detail in the previous chapter by Aizawa, between 1967 and 1997 the New Order government demanded total assimilation of the Chinese in Indonesia and insisted that the process of pembauran, assimilation, be accelerated. The government considered culture to be the main obstacle in this process. The handbook on the resolution of the “Chinese problem” in Indonesia states: “Guidance to assimilate in the realization of unity of the nation should be geared towards the establishment of unity in the value system, and therefore all forms of cultural affinity based on the country of origin should be removed.”\(^1\) Besides the predominant role of the Chinese in the country’s economy, their real or perceived social exclusivity had also constantly been a target of popular criticism. Chinese willingness to merge into the mainstream Indonesian society was persistently questioned.\(^2\)

The logic of the assimilation policy required the Chinese to relinquish their Chineseness and to be absorbed without trace into indigenous society. Chineseness became, more or less, a forbidden cultural identity. The official policy of assimilation pressured the Chinese minority to erase as many traces of Chineseness as possible, e.g. by assuming Indonesian names or abandoning Chinese customs. This assimilation had to be realized through government-sponsored social engineering in the form of legislation that required the Chinese to abandon their culture and exclusiveness. In 1977, the government established the Communication Bureau for the Appreciation of National Unity,\(^1\)

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\(^1\) Badan Koordinasi Inteligensi Nasional (Bakin, Coordinating Body for National Intelligence), 1979.

which acted as the coordinating body to promote and accelerate the process of assimilation.\(^3\)

The formal manifestation of the government’s intent to assimilate the Chinese into the mainstream society took shape in various policies that were meant to suppress Chinese identity. While there were no clear sanctions for those who ignored them, the regulations had, in general, discouraging effects. It is believed that the general response to such changes has been compliance, albeit with covert reluctance, although there have been occasional attempts to ignore or maneuver around the regulations. What is much less known is how precisely the pressure to assimilate was dealt with and whether the “compliance” was “uniform.” Assimilation, as the conventional description of the management of the Chinese in Indonesia, does not capture the dynamics of the accommodation processes and the cultural reformation occurring within the various sectors of the Chinese community. The dominance of the assimilation discourse has created a rather narrow perspective and obscures the various ways people deal with their social environment.

Whereas Aizawa in the previous chapter explores assimilation policies by zooming in on the ignored dimension of the relationship between the state and the Chinese Indonesian community, this chapter investigates the many different reactions to assimilation from Chinese Indonesians in their daily lives. Therefore, rather than speaking in a uniform manner about all Chinese and assuming that all Chinese respond to their socio-political situation in an identical manner, we must develop a more culturally and sociologically realistic understanding of Chinese life in Indonesian society that proceeds on the assumption that culture is not “the undivided property of the whole society” (Bourdieu, 1977, 73), but is instead subject to contestation and divergent interpretations.

In order to do justice to possible divergent interpretations and to contest the idea that the Chinese all reacted in similar ways, this chapter addresses the responses to assimilation from within one particular community, the Yogyakarta Chinese. The chapter attempts to assess how the Yogyakarta Chinese have responded to the pressures to assimilate during the New Order. It intends to show that the regime

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\(^3\) Badan Komunikasi Penghayatan Kesatuan Bangsa, Bakom-PKB, was set up in every province; see the previous chapter by Aizawa in this volume for more details.