Silence, Absence, 
Loss: Chineseness in 
Post-Authoritarian Indonesia

Sonja van Wichelen

Introduction
After decades of complex marginalization, discrimination, and racism, Chinese-Indonesians in post-1998 Indonesia have been given back the democratic space to participate culturally and politically in Indonesian public life. The fall of the authoritarian regime of President Suharto, which lasted for thirty-two years, brought along a number of significant changes for the Chinese-Indonesian minority. Bans geared against the socio-political and cultural participation of Chinese-Indonesians in public life were lifted and various citizenship rights were restored. Manifested in the increase of Chinese temples, Chinese films on national television, a growing Chinese literary output, and the celebration of Chinese New Year, a resurgence of public "Chineseness" seemed to have taken place.¹

In a 2004 article for the Indonesian daily Kompas entitled “Unintentional Racism,” Ariel Heryanto – a cultural theorist on Indonesian and Southeast Asian politics – critiqued the ways in which, in this new political climate, Chinese-Indonesians were “being made Chinese” (dicinakan). In his observation he pointed out the ways in which they were “resinicized” according to narrow definitions of what is to be understood as Chinese culture and traditions. Instead of approaching Chinese-Indonesian identities in their diverse relations and adaptations to local cultures, the resurgence of Chinese culture in the Indonesian public sphere represented an essentialized and homogenous Chinese identity. Heryanto described this process of resinicization as yet another form of racism stemming from the New Order, although unintentionally and positively informed rather than intentionally negative.

Agreeing with Heryanto that these practices are taking place and that they are highly problematic, I would like to explore further the meanings behind this process of
resinicization within a theoretical framework of trauma. Besides government-initiated activities, Chinese-Indonesians among themselves are socializing and participating in the revival of Chineseness. By analyzing excerpts from an Internet discussion forum called Chinese Culture and History (Forum Diskusi Budaya Thionghoa dan Sejarah Tiongkok), I unpack how Chineseness is imagined and desired. I argue that the process of resinicization – as promoted by the excerpts – does not merely concern an expression of cultural identity. Although intended to come to terms with the history of Chinese-Indonesians, resinicization does not enable a working through of a traumatic past. Instead, resinicization becomes constitutive of a misplaced nostalgia in which Chineseness is imagined, desired, and “acted out” as a fixed identity associated with a so-called “authentic” Chinese culture. By deploying the theoretical concepts of absence and loss from the historian Dominick LaCapra onto the framework of Chineseness, I further tease out the complexities involved in appropriating Chineseness. I argue through this framework that processes of resinicization, both externally and internally appropriated, close off rather than facilitate opportunities to recognize or value “Indonesianized” forms of Chineseness.

Contextualizing Chineseness

Most Chinese-Indonesians are so called peranakan Chinese; an old diaspora who came to settle permanently from the seventeenth century onwards in what was then the Dutch East Indies. These Chinese migrants came from different regions in China, derived from different ethnicities, and spoke different languages. During their settlement, they assimilated with local cultures and inter-married with local people. In contemporary Indonesia, most peranakan Chinese do not speak any of the Chinese languages and are more informed by local culture than by Chinese culture. The so-called totok Chinese are defined as either China-born or as having arrived much later in the archipelago. In contrast to peranakan Chinese, the totok Chinese do uphold some form of Chinese culture and sometimes still master their original Chinese languages. In colloquial language, the terms peranakan and totok have been used to denote proximity to Chinese culture, to indicate (often in normative ways) who is, and who is not “authentically Chinese.” In recent decades, researchers have called for a re-examination of the distinction in light of New Order assimilation policies which concerned the “Indonesianization” of all Chinese.²

The repressive New Order regime of President Suharto submitted Chinese-Indonesians to rigorous assimilation policies in which they were thoroughly de-politicized and “Indonesianized” or peranakanized (Aguilar 504). During this period, all Chinese religious, socio-political, or cultural organizations were banned and discriminatory measures were forced onto the Chinese community, such as changing their Chinese names into Indonesian ones. These forms of rigorous assimilation, however, did not engender a common idea that the Chinese were becoming Indonesians.