

# The Quest for Post-Chineseness Among Chinese Indonesian Intellectuals: An Intellectual History Agenda

HARRYANTO ARYODIGUNO AND CHIH-YU SHIH

*Due to the challenge of defining Chineseness, various disciplines can contribute to the subject without a single authority having a monopoly over its scope. Post-Chineseness is an evolving movement that aims to reduce the embarrassment of China scholars at their failure to exchange the methodologies and scopes of their subjects, often rendering them strangers to one another. Recognition is particularly relevant to the study of post-Chineseness. Chineseness is mutually recognized and denied in a variety of ways among both Chinese communities and individuals and in both self-regarded and other-regarded identities. Divergent approaches have created complex behavioral implications and a massive agenda for social science research. An agenda for post-Chineseness can examine these crises in the contemporary social sciences and humanities and has the potential to offer sophistication, recombination, and reconstruction for Chineseness in different contexts. This case study of several Chinese Indonesian intellectuals who have described their identity and connection with China illustrates how an agenda of post-Chineseness can simultaneously explain and deconstruct.*

**KEYWORDS:** post-Chineseness; Indonesia; worlding; pluriversalism; multi-sitedness.

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This paper introduces the concept of post-Chineseness that emerged from an intellectual history project that began in 2002 and applies it to the study of the identity strategies of Chinese Indonesian intellectuals. While Chinese

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**HARRYANTO ARYODIGUNO** is an Assistant Professor at the School of Humanities at the President University. His research interests include international relations in East Asia, Taiwan's political and economic development, Chinese political thought, and relations between China, Indonesia, and Taiwan. He can be reached at <harry\_anto@president.ac.id>.

**CHIH-YU SHIH** (石之瑜) is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at the National Taiwan University. His research interests include IR theory, anthropology of knowledge, China studies, and cultural studies. He can be reached at <cysih@ntu.edu.tw>.

Indonesian identity politics are neither typical nor representative and shouldn't be, their configuration and dynamics are nuanced enough to show the heuristic value of post-Chineseness as an analytical agenda. The actions of these selected Chinese Indonesian intellectuals reveal the strategic nature of identity formation and the need for a concept of identity. This is a concept that allows, enables, and encourages living people who are preoccupied with a certain identity narrative to continue practicing it in different and often contradictory ways.

A discussion of post-Chineseness must logically begin with Chineseness, and the concept is difficult to define. In Japan, Korea, and the rest of East Asia, "Chineseness" is a specific topic often referred to in Mandarin as *Zhonghuaxing* (中華性). This is a term with strong connotations of authentic and authoritative Confucianism and Sinocentrism (Kwon, 2020; Nakai, 1980; O'Dwyer, 2020; Park & Hur, 2016; Richey, 2013; Tsai, 2011; Xu, 2016). In today's Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and the rest of Southeast Asia where there is a significant presence of Chinese heritage, Chineseness is instead referred to as *Huarenxing* (華人性). This is a term with a greater deal of fluidity and hybridity (Hau, 2014; D. Lee, 2017; Seah, 2017; Suryadinata, 2017; Tong, 2011). It is therefore unsurprising that being situated between East and Southeast Asia, Hong Kong and Taiwan display both kinds of Chineseness (Arghirescu, 2018; Chun, 2017; Law, 2009; C.-Y. Lin, 2018). Vietnam, on the other hand, has experienced a classic Confucian *Zhonghuaxing* alongside a claim to non-Chinese indigeneity (Huang, 2020b; C. T. Nguyen, 2023; N. Nguyen, 2014; Q. H. Nguyen et al., 2020; Shih, 2018b). The contrast between these differing readings reveals a strategizing nature of Chineseness that helps to cope with the challenges of identity among its narrators.

While the East Asian neighbors of the People's Republic of China (PRC) enjoy a rich Confucian heritage, they have striven as separate and integral national communities to distinguish themselves from a perceived tainted Chineseness seen in modern China, and this may be driven by their distinct historical experiences. Unlike China, Korea and Japan have managed to avoid complete subjugation to the Mongolian Empire and other invaders from northern Asia (Fogel, 2009; Kim, 2020; C.-M. Wang, 2017). Hong Kong and Taiwan have been untouched by the Communist cultural cleansing of Mainland China (Chan, 2014; Ng, 2021; Qi & Lin, 2021; J. S. H. Wang, 2011). With indigenous cultures that are distinct from and external to Confucianism, Mongolia and Vietnam present a comparative perspective to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of Chineseness (C. T. Nguyen, 2023; Song, 2020; Thrift, 2014).

The colonial histories of communities in East and Southeast Asia have created national identities that are torn between Japanese and European colonial modernity, indigeneity, and migrant Chineseness (Shih et al., 2020). Under the post-colonial

statism and nationalism of these states, Chineseness can meet the conditions for national correctness only if its owners can convince their fellow citizens that it offers differentiation rather than unity. Chineseness must remain distinct from that of the PRC to allay suspicion of its holders belonging to Communist fifth columns. Chinese communities across borders must also remain distinct for fear of them uniting to establish a single Chinese regime. Finally, Chinese communities within a specific nation must remain distinct from one another to alleviate concerns that they will unite to challenge the national leadership (See, 2018; Suryadinata, 2007; Tong, 2010; G. W. Wang, 2003).

Further reflections apply to *Zhongguoxing* (中國性), the Chineseness of the PRC (J. Lu & Gao, 2018; Z. Lu, 2020; Oaks, 2000; C. Wang, 2018; Zheng, 2020). With its complex historical experience, the definition of *Zhongguoxing* can apparently be as disputed as that of *Zhonghuaxing* in either its romanticized authenticity or inflated distinctiveness. China has experienced cycles of cultural revolution, cultural zeal, Westernization, and internationalization on the one hand and construction, assimilation, celebration, suppression, and marketization of its ethnic distinctiveness on the other. The Chineseness of the PRC is based on incompatible pursuits of political correctness: the ideological recognition of ethnic, religious, gender, regional, and occupational differences; the national assimilation of them all; and a social openness to mingling over internal and international boundaries. Recognition is particularly relevant to the study of post-Chineseness, and Chineseness is mutually recognized and denied in a variety of ways among both Chinese communities and individuals and in both self-regarded and other-regarded identities. Divergent approaches have created complex behavioral implications and a massive agenda for social science research (Matejskova, 2014; Shih, 2021).

## **An Emerging Agenda: Significance, Origin, Methodology, and Theory**

### **Significance**

With Chineseness so hard to define, studies of some aspect of the subject can emerge from any discipline without a single authority having a monopoly over its scope (Ong, 1999). Post-Chineseness is an evolving agenda that aims to alleviate the embarrassment of China scholars at a failure to share the methodology or even the scope of their subjects that has often rendered them strangers to one another. This is an estrangement that can exist between traditional medicine and the Shanghai

stock market, the People's Liberation Army and Chinese Peranakan literature, or Mongolian Shamanism and Chinese cuisine. Even an agreed-upon subject like the Confucian classics can bifurcate into considerably divergent practices. Russian Sinologists may see an improved translation of a classic as refined scholarship, while Malaysian scholars uphold "living Sinology" and the nostalgic use of the Confucian classics by the migrants of previous generations. In fact, people point to different things to indicate Chineseness in daily life despite the existence of rampant stereotypes of all sorts. A myriad of signifiers can be evoked to indicate a resemblance between conceived Chinese people as long as they agree (G. W. Wang, 2003). This can be as magnificent as celebrating the Lunar New Year, as deep as recollecting the memory of a soap opera from one's childhood, as emotional as admiring an athlete holding a PRC passport, or as trivial as liking Sichuan-style tofu dishes. Certainly, any signifier has the potential to inspire opposition from others who consider it irrelevant or misleading.

There is plenty of irony apparent in this. While Chineseness continues to mean something to people and even a lot to some, many are unable to clearly express what it means verbally (Kuehn et al., 2013). Anyone who tries to specify Chineseness to convey either political correctness or incorrectness will almost surely be defeated by the lack of a clear self or object in the attempt. The irony arises from the fact that the purpose of its narrators is mainly to reproduce or construct their own relational identities. By internalizing or externalizing the kind of Chineseness conveniently assumed in their narrative at a social site, an individual is able to stabilize their own belonging that will presumably extend beyond their momentary encounter with a resembling or differing signifier of Chineseness. It is therefore a social site of self-reconfirmation relative to the encountered, the bystanders, and the imagined other. In the end, Chineseness is essentially a strategizing trigger of the relational self to stabilize or transcend the transient social site. While this is by no means a uniquely Chinese phenomenon, this stable Chineseness that is so often imagined and referenced is so prevalent and massive that it powerfully reveals a rudimentary and universal practice of relationality either to bridge or to divide. In a nutshell, the abstract idea of Chineseness is more important and long-lasting than its various genealogies.

### **Origin: An Intellectual History of China and Chinese Studies**

The concept of post-Chineseness emerged from the transnational agenda on China studies in 2002 sponsored by the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation, the title of which has evolved over time. It eventually became referred to as the Comparative Intellectual History of China and Chinese Studies among its major national principal

investigators.<sup>1</sup> Since 2003, it has been based at the Research and Educational Center for China Studies and Cross-Taiwan Strait Relations hosted by the Department of Political Science at the National Taiwan University. Through hundreds of oral history interviews conducted in over 30 countries, the theme of post-Chineseness has taken shape as senior scholars are each able to recollect their intellectual growth and career paths together with their reflections. They have done this with differing degrees of accuracy from a multitude of re-imagined paths and perspectives. The year 2015 was pivotal, with post-Chineseness first discussed at three international gatherings. These were the Conference of China Studies in Southeast Asia hosted by the Institute of China Studies at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur on September 7, a lecture titled *Zhonghuaxing, Huarenxing, yu Houhuaxing: Bijiao Dongnanya de Huaren yu Zhongguo yanjiu* (中華性, 華人性, 與後華性: 比較東南亞的華人與中國研究, *Zhonghuaxing, Huarenxing, and Post-Chineseness: Comparing Chinese and China Studies in Southeast Asia*) hosted by the Institute of Chinese Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong on October 13, and the Conference on Intellectual History of International China Studies: Communication and Conversations hosted by the CASS Forum at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing on October 29 and 30. The concept was discussed in great detail on these occasions with a strong contribution by a group of scholars associated with the above-mentioned agenda.

Research projects and publications on post-Chineseness have emerged within a few years, including journal articles, book chapters, and collective volumes, the first of which was constituted by the contributions from the CASS conference and published by the Chinese Social Science Press (中國社會科學出版社, *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe*) in 2017 under the title *From Sinology to Post-Chineseness: Intellectual Histories of China, Chinese People, and Chinese Civilization*. Two doctoral dissertations in 2019 and one Master's thesis in 2015 that adopt the post-Chineseness approach have succeeded at the College of Social Science at the National Taiwan University. The topics covered by these post-Chineseness analyses include ethnicity (Aryodiguno, 2020), identity (H. E. Lee, 2019), electoral campaigns (Soon, 2018), religion (Zhang, 2019), intellectual history (Huang, 2020b; Shih, 2018b), foreign policy (Soon, 2019), global China (Clemente & Shih, 2019), international relations (Shih, 2018a) and post-Western studies (Shih, 2017). On October 31, 2019, *Wenhui Scholars* of Shanghai *Wenhui Daily* published the first written endeavor to connect post-Chineseness to what this paper's second author has termed "relational Sinology" in contrast with concepts like overseas, international, global, or world Sinology. Relational Sinology treats China studies as the practices of the relational selves of

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<sup>1</sup>An incomplete list is available on the Center's website <<http://www.china-studies.taipei/>>.

practitioners and scholars. It explores socialism (Shih, 2016), colonialism (Shih et al., 2020), religiosity (Manomaivibool & Shih, 2016; Shih & Kao, 2020), and international relations (Shih et al., 2019) in a pluriversal world co-constituted by scholarship, practices, and identities at various levels and their intersections in the name of China and Chineseness. Shih's (2022) latest volume on this agenda titled *Post-Chineseness: Cultural Politics and International Relations* collects many of the above writings.

### **Methodology: Sitedness and Multi-Sitedness**

Chineseness can be a serviceable reference to a person, object, or practice merely if the scholar or practitioner judges that it fits the site of its incurrence. The proper methodological underpinning of a post-Chineseness agenda that allows for comparative research is thus "sitedness". Sitedness is both the methodological position of the post-Western school of international relations and a sister methodology of multi-sitedness in cultural anthropology (Boccagni, 2014; Marcus, 1995; Shani, 2008; Shimizu & Noro, 2020). Post-Western IR refers to the appropriation of Western values and institutions in geo-cultural trajectories outside the West, rendering differences and similarities indistinguishable due to complex relationalities that disallow binaries without determined suppression (Trowsell et al., 2021). This requires both historical and geo-cultural sensibilities to trace the multiple relationalities of all of the encountered actors at the site of an event, which can only be arbitrarily and partially comprehensible to anyone. Multi-sitedness especially focuses on trans-local experiences that constitute the emotions and identities of the interacting actors (Alloatti, 2019; G. W. Wang, 1993). Multi-sitedness acknowledges the individual's constant departure from a single site, a fact that is more apparent over time (Clemente, 2019). It therefore exists both between sites or moments and within the same individual under different temporal-spatial contexts, giving rise to an agenda of shifting sides, self-contradictions, dialectics, cycles, and reincurring as well as the coexistence of alleged Chineseness and non-Chineseness (Wu, 1991).

We use "site" rather than terms such as "location," "place," or "position" that connote physical space to signify a transient moment and shifting domain for the specific actions of players in a given relational context. Sitedness involves evolving perspectives and interactive subjectivities rather than fixed objects that are presented multiple times, though actors can certainly romanticize a territorial scope to signify their sense of belonging or estrangement. As such, sitedness implies the intersectionality of trajectories. These sited practices presumably reconstitute Chineseness, provide it with multiple fluid meanings, and qualify social science concepts that were originally considered universal. We approach sitedness through the *encounter* (with an event, perspective, object, dream, identity, alter, or anything meaningful to the continuity

of the practices of life), and the *choice* indicated by the strategic selection, recombination, and renovation of perceived possibilities and impossibilities. The method of encountering produces a sitedness that is shared (Diesing & Hartwig, 2005; Harding, 1998; Stehr & Meja, 2005) while the mechanism of choice navigates it (Phye, 1997, pp. 52, 110; Stalnaker, 2010; Stanley, 2005). Whereas encountering is largely socially prepared, choice is premised upon the existence and improvisation of alternatives. Together, they show how sitedness carries, revises, or expands the existing relations into the future or terminates them instantly.

Given that a site is when and where the interactions and reflections occur, its forms and processes are not subject to an *a priori* determination. Rather, the site emerges through the improvisation of the actors. The relationality and indeterminacy of sitedness thus require an approach to accommodate its ever-evolving complications and allow an openness to fresh nuances. Methodologically, there must be room to discuss narrative and discursive sites as well as temporal-spatial or geo-cultural ones. This is because whichever is relevant to preceding or subsequent behavior depends on the characteristics of the invoked encounter. This encounter may take place between parties such as historical or contemporary actors, the observing and the observed, or role makers and takers, and its sensibilities privilege no one. Even the living while they make sense of alleged past personalities and events are inescapably co-constituted by the dead and the relational contexts that facilitate their non-physical encountering and strategized representation through ideas, imaginations, documents, metaphors, and other intellectual vehicles.

Accordingly, understanding Chineseness involves the consideration of an endless cycle of effects on the part of the audience. Namely, Chineseness is conceived differently or similarly by the imagined audience due to the relations embedded in their prior and current engagement with it. A site is where Chineseness attains both discursive and object agency (Allard et al., 2018; Dikotter, 2008; Malafouris, 2013). As scholars and practitioners interpret Chineseness based on their unique perspectives and audiences, non-Chinese can neither determine nor reject it. The object agency of Chineseness is relational in at least two senses. It involves relations between people and their environment (including other people, animals, and the non-living environment) (Bumochir et al., 2020; Magnani, 2018; Nyiri, 2017; Y. Wang, 2017) while also constituting those of *other* people and their environment. In this way, relational Chineseness constrains people from completely strategizing it at will.

### **Theoretical Framework: Relational Sinology**

Sitedness has theoretical repercussions that extend far beyond post-Chineseness to imply that any post-identities are intrinsically kinds of post-Chineseness and

*vice versa* depending on the relationalities evoked by the actors. Even so, no actors are qualified as initiators of interaction merely by acting upon the prior relationalities that constitute them. In other words, all actors practice making and taking the roles expected of them as they perceive them. This is how interactions constitute all actors, including both the living and the dead. In this regard, four theoretical approaches already contribute to the study of post-Chineseness: intellectual history, the role theory of altercasting, relational theory, and emotional analysis.

The foremost theoretical resources for a post-Chineseness agenda are the intellectual histories of China, the Chinese people, and Chinese civilization (Góralczyk, 2018; K. Lin & Shih, 2018; Matthyssen & Dessein, 2017; Paternicò, 2018; Voskressenski, 2020). These histories of knowledge position a scholar or practitioner in a relation that prioritizes one of the two following puzzles: their own Chineseness vs. the Chineseness of their encountering. The first puzzle may be answered by an individual relating to an alter that represents Chineseness and the latter by their consciously representing Chineseness to judge the alter's identities. For example, a migrant may take a self-regarded external position of *looking inward* from their (imagined) hometown but an internal position of *looking outward* at the host society. An outward-looking perspective indicates an individual's readiness to judge the Chineseness of others on behalf of the Chinese people in general. In contrast, an inward-looking perspective reflects no such readiness to represent an imagined general Chinese people. In other words, the outward-looking actors strategize the identities of the others and the inward-looking actors those of the self. Their different positioning between these two puzzles guides them to explore different kinds of answers, either to cast their Chineseness in the expectation of others or to cast the Chineseness of others in their expectation of them. With their intellectual history breeding a consciousness toward Chineseness, their motivation can be described as altercasting or self-altercasting; that is, to remain related or unrelated to a particular reference group by satisfying or defying their expectations regarding their Chineseness.

Alongside self/positioning in the choice between looking out and looking in, the substantive judgment that designates the identities of the self and others can be divided according to the kind of intellectual resources that actors enlist to justify it. Such resources can be ostensibly *objective* under a certain universal criterion like citizenship, ancestry, language, ritual, geography, or class or *subjective* in one's perspective of patriotism, culture, shared history, belief, or partnership. Objective resources do not depend on individual appropriation or interpretation, while subjective resources that enable actors to engage in post-identities of the self and others are ideational. A strategy triggers and reflects a certain emotion like passion, anxiety, or aversion. Similarly,



**Table 1**  
*Post-Chineseness Facing an Imagined China*

Position	Subjects inside	Subject in-between	Subject outside
Resource			
Ideational criteria			
Objective criteria			

*Note.* Made by the authors.

**Table 2**  
*Post-Chineseness Representing an Imagined China*

Position	Objects inside	Object in-between	Object outside
Resource			
Ideational criteria			
Objective criteria			

*Note.* Made by the authors.

a perceived success or failure in self-altercasting may lead to a shift in positioning due to depression, disappointment, or aversion (Wong, 2018).

Intellectual history projects have interviewed over 500 scholars, doctors, diplomats, journalists, novelists, artists, directors, managers, travelers, and migrants. The interviewers and interviewees either look at or from China with some switching lenses during their intellectual lives (Clemente & Combinido, 2019; Lomová & Zádřapová, 2016; Ngeow, 2019). Both inductively and deductively, the inward-looking and outward-looking positions can be further divided into three categories, as the roles of the individuals and the alters can be seen as being *of China*, *apart from China*, or *in between*. While roles emerge to meet these decisions on identity, the inward-looking position is more likely to involve a self-altercasting that presumably satisfies the expectation of a Chinese alter concerning how to be Chinese. The aforementioned intellectual history projects additionally provide hints on how actual decisions are made about the kinds of objective and subjective references that are enlisted to support positioning and subsequent altercasting (Cheng, 2016; Huang, 2020a).

### **Illustration: Post-Chinese Indonesian Intellectuals**

The following discussion of several Chinese Indonesian intellectuals who describe their identity and connection with China illustrates how a post-Chineseness agenda simultaneously explains and deconstructs. They exemplify the conjunctural

influences of both relational trajectories and individualized agencies. Noticeably, China and Chinese ethnicity are not distinguishable categories in contemporary Indonesian academics (Thung, 2017) to the extent that the image of Indonesia as a “Chinatown outside of China” arouses occasional alarm. Assimilating the local Chinese has been a long-standing discourse from both indigenous and ethnic Chinese perspectives (Heidhues, 2017a; Wasino et al., 2019). While the PRC is stereotypically viewed as powerful, Chinese Indonesians are seen as marginalized yet rich. Both, however, are notable elements in the social landscape of Indonesia. “Chineseness” in the inward-looking context connotes (1) a degree of alienness; (2) wealth; and (3) an ambivalence of threat and opportunity (Hoon, 2017) all to be determined by the encountering identities. Self-conscious Chinese Indonesians who encounter this inward-looking position are often compelled to mimic it to survive discrimination and exclusion (Hew, 2017; Muzakki, 2010). This requires self-altercasting in a position toward China that is at least partially external to it. Besides, the Chinese neighborhoods that are scattered across the dense indigenous population are by no means a coherent group with the means to live, think, and act in unison (Arifin et al., 2017; Suryadinata, 2004). In short, the conditions facing Chinese Indonesians have offered them the choice of being either *apart from* China or *in between*. Given that we failed to find a ready intellectual among Totok Chinese groups to interview, there is no trace in our research of a self-identity corresponding to an exclusive in-group member of China.

### **The Changing Identities of Chinese Indonesian People**

During the Dutch colonial period, Chinese Indonesians were viewed as second-class citizens. Although some were born in Indonesia and others were migrants, all were classified as Chinese with the founding of the Republic of China in 1912. After Indonesian independence, President Sukarno (1901–1970) initially decided that only those born locally without Chinese citizenship would be citizens of Indonesia. It was also undecided whether Chinese citizens should be allowed to naturalize (Aryodiguno, 2019). Those favoring Indonesian citizenship were divided regarding how to proceed strategically, with supporters of *integration* preferring to keep a Chinese cultural identity and those of *assimilation* advocating total conversion to an Indonesian one. The debate initially provoked discussion only among the Chinese. After an anti-Communist coup in 1965 overthrew Sukarno, the new Suharto regime adopted the view that Chinese Indonesians were ready supporters of Chinese Communists and should be forced to assimilate, and Chinese identity became a problem of national security.

Chinese Indonesians who chose to identify as Chinese were likewise divided by the Chinese Civil War into two categories with the “Reds” or “new China group” accepting citizenship in the People’s Republic of China and the “Blues” or “pure China group” remaining loyal to the Republic of China that had fled to Taiwan. Most of these individuals returned to mainland China and Taiwan after 1965. The relative minority who remained in Indonesia became stateless after Suharto severed diplomatic relations with China. These individuals were offered “Indonesian Nationality Certificates” (Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia [SBKRI]). Another artificial division existed between “Peranakan” and “Totok” Chinese. “Peranakan” refers to Chinese Indonesians who were born locally and primarily Indonesian speaking, while “Totok” denotes Chinese who have recently immigrated to the country and retained their language. The Peranakan regarded the Totok as having a lower educational and economic status, while the Totok looked down on them for having lost their Chineseness (Mitrayani, 2019).

Ironically, the preoccupation with the Chinese problem and determined policy of assimilation during the Suharto years offered Chinese Indonesians a shared consciousness and a common plight. Not only did integration disappear as a viable strategy, successful mingling with indigenous Indonesians also proved inadequate at shielding one’s Chinese heritage from ethnic repression. During the 1998 riots that ravaged Chinese communities, the hardest-hit areas were those of assimilated ethnic Chinese in the city of Jakarta and the wider Java region where Totok settlements were rare (Suryadinata, 2004). Oppression was likewise less significant in South Sumatera (Medan), Riau (Bagan Siapi-api), the Riau Islands (Batam), and West Kalimantan (Pontianak and Singkawang) where the local populations maintained Chinese language and customs. Themes of assimilation and Sinicization have compelled intellectuals and experts to answer whether or not they are compatible (Aryodiguno, 2018; Setijadi, 2016b).

Chineseness in Indonesia has been associated with a sense of alienness in the background of colonialism and Cold War relations. The Dutch policy of treating Chinese people as second-class citizens and separating Chinese migrants involved in the colonial trade from the indigenous population created a deep-seated psycho-cultural structure that politically sensitizes Chineseness despite the mingling between the two peoples in certain circles or the Chinese contribution to Indonesian independence (Aryodiguno, 2020). Chinese people under colonialism were strategically divided between their homeland, their colonizers, and indigenous Indonesians. In a newly independent country crafting its foreign policy in the midst of the Cold War, China experts in Indonesia were similar to others in South and Southeast Asia in that the majority did not rely on Chinese-language sources (Shih, 2019). As they used English as their

main professional language, they saw China through a lens that Katzenstein (2012) would call “Anglo-Chinese.” This tendency remains today, and it connects China and Chinese studies to the studies of Chinese Indonesians. This is relevant to Chinese Indonesian relations in that the security concerns of the Cold War have created a legacy of viewing Chinese Indonesians as potential Communist agents (Setijadi, 2016a). In short, the “Chinese Indonesian problem” is still a matter of concern. Contemporary Indonesian political culture is preoccupied with how China exercises its soft power through local Chinese people.

Sitedness evolves, multiplies, and shifts in cycles, however, and Indonesia’s democratization has accompanied and aided a heightened awareness of Chineseness (Chung, 2018; Hoon, 2012). The end of the 1998 riots and the beginning of reforms prompted a new wave of immigrants from China and Taiwan. The arrival of this distinct group of Chinese reactivated concerns in the Chinese community of being perceived as improperly Totok and fears of new anti-Chinese sentiment among the indigenous population (Sampurna, 2019). Even so, this greater diversity has also taken place during a re-Sinicization movement that actively embraces Chinese culture, supports ethnic rights, and reconnects Chinese Indonesians and Chinese from the PRC through a surge of trade and investment (Koning, 2007). Given the traditional association of China studies with Chinese Indonesian studies (Thung, 2017), the past impression of Chinese Indonesians refusing to assimilate has provided self-regarded non-Chinese with a ready reference for understanding re-Sinicization. There is irony in this new wariness of Chinese identity, however. While West Kalimantan and other communities outside of Java maintain Chinese customs and languages without provoking any opposition in their neighborhoods, Javan politics has resorted to fear-mongering about re-Sinicization to mobilize voters by targeting those who no longer consciously practice Chineseness.

The Suharto regime made an effort at cooperation and co-optation to make Chineseness an acceptable part of Indonesianness, and this can be observed in the military’s different roles in anti-Chinese riots. The military could either provide protection or engage in oppression depending on its relationship with the Chinese community which was shaped by the social relationships of Chinese Indonesians and political relationships in national politics (Heidhues, 2017b; Muslim AR, 2016). This differs from indigenous politicians such as those in West Kalimantan who can boast a relatively stable record of denouncing rather than provoking ethnic tensions. On the other hand, indigenous Chinese cultural leaders have maintained a certain Indonesian identity while working to preserve Chinese literature and maintain a minimal solidarity with Chinese people in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China.

Consequently, identifying both how to evaluate different practices of Chineseness from an inward-looking position and how to preserve Chineseness at an outward-looking site has been a complex, inconsistent, and even dangerous endeavor. In the same vein, the perspective of post-Indonesianness that reexamines what ought to comprise an Indonesian identity can offer a comparative agenda. In the following analysis, we will demonstrate that post-Chineseness and post-Indonesianness can engage one another (Matsumura, 2019).

### **Understandings of China Among Four Indonesian Writers**

This section presents interviews with four Indonesian intellectuals. These include Professor Ju Lan Thung, the journalist Sunardi Mulia, Congressman Hendry Jurnawan, and Benny G. Setiono, the founder and organizer of an ethnic Chinese association. These interviews indicate four different strategies toward Chineseness following the 2×2 table: (1) the inward-looking dimension of being in-between or apart from China; and (2) the resource dimension of being objective or ideational. Instead of each representing a fixed category whose precise nature would be debated, their categorization is relational rather than personal, and each can adopt more than one strategy with a shift in context or the progression of their life cycles. In a nutshell, themes of assimilation and Sinicization compel intellectuals and experts to answer whether or not they are compatible. Like everyone else, they can insist, adjust, adapt, or evade depending upon their taking on the two dimensions of post-Chineseness and changing reflections over time and in context. However, each has experienced life-threatening encounters that required more flexibility, determination, and sensitivity in their decisions than at other sites. This has created a precarious consciousness that has endured despite there having been two decades since the last large-scale anti-Chinese riot and the fact that fairly common smaller-scale events have generally failed to escalate.

Benny G. Setiono and Ju Lan Thung were born in Java, Sunardi Mulia in South Sumatera, and Hendry Jurnawan in West Kalimantan. This means that the latter two have experienced fewer ethnic tensions and their Chineseness is largely self-determined. In contrast, Thung and Setiono identify as Indonesians who see their Chineseness purely as a cultural ethnicity that is subordinate to their principal national identity. Nevertheless, China at a distance is a cultural homeland for all four writers. All acknowledge their indebtedness to Chinese culture, although Thung does so to a far less extent. The four rather differ in how they recognize and accept their Chineseness and if they see China as their native land or a foreign country.

Setiono (2016) is one of the founders of the Ikatan Nasional Tionghoa Indonesia (National Association of Chinese-Indonesians). He has adopted an indigenous Chinese identity that views Chineseness from an external Indonesian position and has accused the Chinese “Totok” of disloyalty toward Indonesia by prioritizing their businesses over national interests. He notes the contributions that he and other indigenous Chinese can make to society while claiming that the Totok offer none. Setiono has voiced concerns about how mainstream Indonesian society views its local Chinese people and advocates self-adjustment and self-restraint. He therefore asserts that Chinese culture cannot be used as a benchmark for Chinese Indonesian identity and that Chinese cultural resources are most useful where they practically form a bridge between indigenous Chinese and PRC Chinese to develop business opportunities. This is how they can enhance Indonesian national interests and Indonesians can benefit equally from their use. Setiono sees China as an external and objective entity and re-Sinicization as a vehicle for indigenous Chinese to demonstrate their capacity to use their Chineseness as a resource to share benefits with their fellow Indonesians.

For Jurnawan (2017), Chinese cultural resources can enhance self-respect and enrich self-identity. This may be because the local Indonesian people in his birthplace of Pontianak, West Kalimantan have benefited from their adoption and adherence to Chinese customs. Jurnawan believes that Chinese Indonesians ought to learn about China and can play a significant role as the two countries strengthen ties. While Jurnawan as a former politician was obliged to take an oath of office, this does not preclude him from promoting Chinese literature among Chinese Indonesians to nurture a sense of pride in their heritage despite the political necessity for them to maintain a low profile. He has seen himself as tasked to promote Chinese identity by importing Chinese-language magazines and books. While this makes him partially *of* China, he is likewise *apart from* China in the sense that he understands Chineseness as being comfortable and familiar with Chinese literature. As Jurnawan’s endeavor is a more separate but equal coexistence with indigenous Indonesians, he therefore sees mutual engagement, appreciation, and adjustment as less important than preservation.

Mulia (2015) has worked more aggressively out of a belief that Chinese cultural resources can enrich the Chinese perspectives of Chinese Indonesians. During his tenure as editor-in-chief of the Indonesian Business Daily, Mulia worked to promote cultural intermingling by reporting on events in both China and Taiwan to local readers while reporting on local Indonesian politics, economics, and culture to the larger diaspora of Chinese readers outside Indonesia. Mulia views Chineseness as a cultural heritage and a source of inspiration. Whereas Benny Setiono sees re-Sinicization as beneficial to Indonesia as a whole, Hendry Jurnawan and Sunardi Mulia see

the movement as largely for the benefit of Chinese Indonesians. Jurnawan has even promoted an outward-looking position from within Chineseness to evaluate Indonesia in general, seeing Chineseness as a culturally embedded means to motivate action. This contrasts with Sunardi Mulia’s use of cultural resources primarily to undergird a simple sense of uniqueness.

Thung (2016) is the only one among these four with an overtly critical stance toward the indigenous population. She is also a determined outsider of China, however defined. Thung’s self-regarded Chineseness is innate and therefore needs no explanation or cultural support from re-Sinicization or approval from the indigenous population. Through this peculiar combination of “subjective Chineseness” and the “outsider position,” she is able to argue that assimilation is both unnecessary and doomed to failure. Thung has declared the past several decades of assimilation to be a failure and states that the Chinese problem is not one of Chineseness but of discrimination against indigenous Chinese (Suryadinata, 2005; Tan, 2008). In her view, Indonesia’s policy of assimilation is both the cause of discrimination and an obstacle to assimilation. Thung derives self-respect from an unquestionable Indonesian identity that protects her Chineseness alongside that of other concerned and assertive intellectuals. At the same time, she does not share the strong curiosity of others as to its nature.

The classification of post-Chineseness in Table 3 is dependent on whether the actor sees themselves as being of or partially of China and whether they see Chineseness as a subjective quality or an objective resource. Once these two decisions have been made, their behavior can be explained as a strategic choice to assert equality, assimilation, re-Sinicization, or self-respect.

**Table 3**  
*Stances of Post-Chinese Indonesians<sup>a</sup>*

Are Chinese outsiders? Is Chineseness subjective?	Outsiders	Outsiders/ cultural insiders
Subjective identity	Ju Lan Thung Stance: Equality	Sunardi Mulia Stance: Re-Sinicization
Subjective identity & objective resource	Benny G. Setiono Stance: Assimilation	Hendry Jurnawam Stance: Self-respect

*Note.* Made by the authors.

<sup>a</sup>This table reflects an inward-looking perspective, as our interviewees do not choose to represent the Chinese people in general or aid in determining the nature and degree of the Chineseness of others. In this regard, an agenda of post-Indonesianness on the identity strategizing of Chinese Indonesians would be more sophisticated and challenging in comparison since it would involve both the inward and outward-looking perspectives.

## **Relational Chineseness: Worlding, Pluriversality, and Intersectionality**

Scholars and practitioners engaging with China are situated at a unique crossroads in time. The post-Chineseness agenda examines the crises in contemporary social sciences and humanities and offers sophistication, recombination, and reconstruction. The social sciences and other disciplines that are predominantly Western-centric are currently failing to promote good society governance, one of their core promises. Its long-held values of global liberal democracy have often delivered corruption, division, surveillance, poverty, discrimination, and war (Sachs, 2022; Zuboff, 2022). With the sense of disillusionment this has created, the world's academics have been further divided by the quest for non-Western knowledge in the postcolonial Global South and the Chinese model. With Western liberalism, the post-colonialism of the global south, and the Confucianism of greater China, post-Chineseness stands in a place that is significant and yet disquieting. Surprisingly, no one has conceived of Chineseness in this way. There is therefore an urgent need among all Indonesians to reconsider the social forces that shape the way they act on post-Chineseness and other post-identities that govern their relations if they wish to avoid further estrangement from one another.

The post-Chineseness of Indonesian Chinese intellectuals, by comparison, is a relatively straightforward movement because it reflects a primarily inward-looking perspective in which our interviewees did not claim to represent the Chinese people or judge the nature and degree of Chineseness in others. Their common problem was rather one of self-identity. In this regard, an agenda of post-Indonesianness concerning the identity of Chinese Indonesians would be more sophisticated and challenging since it would involve both inward and outward-looking perspectives. An extended agenda in the future might include Chinese intellectuals elsewhere in Southeast Asia like Chinese Malaysians (Ngeow, 2019), Chinese Vietnamese (C. T. Nguyen, 2023), and Chinese Thais (Manomaivibool, 2015).

Post-Chineseness in Indonesia necessitates that China experts reflect critically upon our research and directly confront the failure of academics to respond to the crises of liberalism. Most importantly, we must ask how our engagement can promote tolerance for diversity in the way we see China and Chineseness at this juncture between Western liberalism, post-colonialism, and the notion of a greater China. If successful, the results can be liberating. Post-Chineseness will not seek integration by default (Shih, 2021) but will interact with Indonesian culture through a framework of Western, global south, and Chinese sensibilities. It can also galvanize academia and society to progress toward a tolerance for diversity in the ways we think and act with respect to one another, creating a *shared global perspective*. The post-Chineseness



movement has made Sinologists aware of intricate interpretations of China and Chinese culture within the Indonesian context and its implications for the future of academic disciplines. Finally, navigating post-Chineseness will be an important step for Indonesia as it moves beyond the confinement of Western-centric academic disciplines to a pluriversality that takes in the contributions of both the West and the global south.

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