

# Language, Nationalism, and Chinese-Indonesian Identity

JESLYN TATANG



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: My final paper for Professor Li Zhang's Introduction to Cultural Anthropology course challenged me to address an open-ended prompt in which I was required to conduct ethnographic fieldwork to explore the cultural effects of migration. I took this as an opportunity to examine the history of my family, Chinese-Indonesian immigrants to America, in the broader context of the May 1998 Jakarta Riots. Three languages are central to the Chinese-Indonesian immigrant identity: Mandarin Chinese, Indonesian, and English. While they allow us to preserve our diverse and fractured heritage, they simultaneously serve as barriers in our search for a sense of belonging, particularly in the face of migration and anti-Chinese legislation. In this paper, I explore the sources of generational cultural disconnect within the Chinese-Indonesian immigrant community throughout history, using my own family as a case study.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Under normal circumstances, producing meaningful original research involving fieldwork, in a discipline you have no prior training or experience in, as a college freshman, all within the condensed space of an 11-week term, would be an exceedingly difficult task. To do so under the shifting conditions and uncertainties of a rapidly emerging global pandemic, while negotiating therefore constant changes in course protocols and expectations, is nothing short of remarkable.*

*The first time I met with Jeslyn during office hours, she seemed frustrated and uncertain about the research paper assigned to our Introduction to Cultural Anthropology class. The prompt was admittedly open-ended, with minimal guidelines beyond the requisite "fieldwork" component. But what, Jeslyn asked, constitutes "fieldwork," in the scope of such an assignment? Together, we brainstormed possible topics for the*

*assignment. It was in conversation that Jeslyn transformed that state of uncertainty into the beginnings of the beautiful, complex inquiry below. Jeslyn tentatively introduced an idea that seemed to have been nagging at her since long before this class—she wanted to understand her family, who had the unique and complicated experience of negotiating multiple identities simultaneously, and continually. It was clear to me then that once she felt authorized to do so, Jeslyn would take the opportunity to pursue this question fruitfully and with care.*

*In Jeslyn's essay below, she not only demonstrates the uncommon ability to rigorously detangle those complex histories of identity and (un)belonging, and to meaningfully theorize that complexity; she does so as an act of caring intimately—attempting to better understand the narrative archives of her family, and the experiences of her parents and grandparents, spanning three countries and three generations and multiple linguistic and national identities. It is a rare and gratifying experience to have a student as interested and committed as Jeslyn, and I am thankful to see her share with us this beautiful narrative of her family.*

—Tobias Smith, Cultural Studies Graduate Group

In May 1998, a score of violent riots broke out in the major cities of Indonesia. Across Jakarta, Medan, and Surakarta, Chinese businesses were burned, and thousands of the country's ethnic Chinese population were targets of torture and rape. Many of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese fled to escape the violence—some, like my own parents, to the United States. But even in America, the question of identity still remained. On top of their newfound American nationalities, they struggled to balance their ethnic Chinese identities with their linguistic Indonesian identities, facing an ambiguous sense of disconnect from all three cultures. My parents' case—one amongst the thousands of Chinese-Indonesian refugees—offers a valuable insight into this phenomenon, and my own personal experiences with identity were shaped through which languages they deliberately passed down to me and which ones they didn't. Despite being slighted due to centuries of discrimination, the Indonesian language has had a profound effect on preserving the heritage of Chinese-Indonesians, even throughout the process of assimilation into the American culture.

In the broad sense, a common language is an essential aspect of a national identity. Through the standardization of a language, a group of

people with common values is afforded a method of clear communication, giving them the sense of being part of a “whole,” rather than identifying with their regional dialects. The German language is a clear example of this phenomenon. Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible into German was in fact an effort to unite the Bohemian, Austrian, East Prussian, and Yiddish dialects into a common language that would later become the basis of national unification for what was at the time “a patchwork of small and large states, linguistically very diverse” (Joseph 98-99). The same is true of Indonesia, where hundreds of languages are spoken, with regional dialects ranging from Javanese, Sundanese, and Minangkabau. Plotting independence from Dutch colonial rule in the 20th century, Indonesian nationalists reformed the Malay language into Indonesia’s current standard language, Bahasa Indonesia, with the goal of “breaking down communication barriers and facilitating inclusion of more than 300 ethnic groups in the new nation” (Fetfling).

The very definition of a nation, however, is commonly disputed. It is often defined as “an expanse of territory, its inhabitants and . . . its [ruling] government” (Joseph 92), but there is no such thing as a “pure” nation due to the effects of global exchange through trade and communication. Concerning the United States, Linton writes, “There can be no question about the average American’s . . . desire to preserve this precious heritage at all costs. . . . Nevertheless, some insidious foreign ideas have already wormed [their] way into his civilization” (Linton is alluding to the pervasiveness of foreign influence in U.S. society, as Americans use products imported from overseas in their daily life without ever realizing their origin). In countries like Indonesia, “immigration has made the population visibly diverse” (Joseph 92) linguistically, ethnically, and culturally. Additionally, evidence of the Netherlands’ previous imperial dominance lies in loanwords in the Indonesian language, such as *rijstaffel*, a Dutch word literally translated as “rice table” but meaning an elaborate meal of Indonesian dishes. While the definition of national identity is in flux, the presence of a national language serves to unite the many diverse peoples of a given nation.

**Nonetheless, national identity does not always** align with linguistic identity, as in the case of Indonesia’s ethnic Chinese. Although they spoke Bahasa Indonesia, the fact that they shared this cultural aspect with the indigenous Indonesian population was eclipsed by centuries of

systematic discrimination on the basis of perceived race. Race itself does not have a scientific basis, and “not the slightest successful attempt has been made to establish causes for the behavior of a people rather than historical or social conditions” (Boas 8). Our capabilities and values are shaped by our environments rather than genetics, but still, the concept of racism comes with undeniable ramifications in the real world. The first immigrants from China maintained trade links between the kingdoms of Java and Sumatra; later, they maintained trade links between Dutch colonials and Javanese aristocrats, and were considered “outsider entrepreneurs” (Lan 200). This “predominant commercial minority group” (200) was kept strategically “exclusive and unassimilable [from indigenous Indonesians] . . . to sustain its potential for scapegoat politics” (Rakindo 346). As such, resentment grew under Suharto’s regime, when Chinese-Indonesians were accused of “economic encroachment” (346) and seen as a “communist menace” (Lindsey 14). In 1965, the Mandarin language was outlawed; so when my parents, who are first-generation Chinese-Indonesian immigrants to San Francisco, visited me in the common lounge of my dorm building, they answered my questions in a convoluted mix of English and Bahasa Indonesia—not Mandarin.

“All Chinese schools in the country were forced to close after 1965,” my mother told me. “Tutoring was illegal. You couldn’t speak Mandarin in public. I was lucky I still had a private tutor.” My father added, “I had a private tutor who would come visit in secret, and we would use textbooks that had been smuggled from Taiwan.” In 1996, legislation required that Chinese surnames be legally changed to conform to “Indonesian” standards; my grandfather changed our Chinese surname, Tang, to Tatang—a romanization of *dàtáng*, or the “great Tang dynasty”—as a symbol of quiet resistance, and the Indonesian government unwittingly approved the change. “But still,” my dad interjected, suddenly angry, “even if you changed your name—your *whole* name—if you still looked Chinese, you still couldn’t get a good job or get into good schools.” They were forced to shed their Chinese heritage—their Mandarin language and Mandarin names. But rather than allowing them to assimilate into Indonesian culture, this made them, curiously, all the more distant from it. They continued trying to hold onto this part of their identity in secret, and their resentment for the Indonesian government quietly seethed.

To escape this prejudice, many Chinese-Indonesians left the country for places where they could instead express all aspects of their

identity, including their Chinese heritage. However, this often meant they were faced with the new challenge of navigating yet another national identity. An estimated 100,000 ethnic Chinese left Indonesia in mid-May 1998 (Lindsey 21). Those proficient in English tended to settle in the United States, where their language skills granted them access to new opportunities—53% of professional and managerial occupations were fulfilled by Chinese-Americans in 2008 (Tickner). America was a new home where they had a chance to reinvent themselves. My parents had secretly learned Mandarin under the Suharto regime, but never gained fluency, and thus did not identify with China. When I asked, my dad laughed and said, “No. I don’t know anything about China; I didn’t grow up there. I just go there for vacation.” After staying in San Francisco for 22 years, not counting the time he was an international student at San Francisco State University before the riots, he said he felt more American than Indonesian. “If I really wanted to,” he joked, “I could change my name back to Chinese. I could be *táng yǒngníng* again, if I wanted. You could even be *tóng wainei* [the Cantonese version of my Mandarin name] and no one would know the difference.” This made the three of us laugh; he rubbed at his eyes, as it was 10 p.m. and he still had to drive home on the freeway. They seemed relieved, though, knowing that they had the freedom to change their names back, the freedom to simply exist—freedoms they had not been afforded in Indonesia.

Despite all their talk of changing our surnames back, they never felt any real obligation to do it. They no longer felt any strong connections to Mandarin, or “possess[ed] a bond with China beyond purely economic interests” (Lan 199), and so we remained Tatangs. “In America, if I want to speak Mandarin, I don’t have to look over my shoulder,” my mom said. “Even though you live in Indonesia, you’re still of Chinese heritage. They don’t accept you wholly as a citizen. But here, I feel like I belong. When I first came, it was hard to adapt. But eventually, Bahasa Indonesia became my second language and English became my first language, because I spoke it every day instead of Indonesian. It switched.” English had been my parents’ second language at school in Indonesia, but in America, it suddenly became the primary language of their daily lives. As former international students, they assimilated nearly seamlessly into American culture, easily addressing strangers with *sir* and *ma’am* instead of *pak* and *mbak*. At work, my mother conversed with her coworkers in English, resorting to stilted Mandarin only when the other party could not speak

English. Unlike Mandarin or Bahasa Indonesia, their experiences with English were not directly forced upon them by any government policy; they had chosen to study it in high school for themselves, because, as my father put it, “it seemed like a useful language.” They felt more American than Indonesian because they spoke English more than Bahasa Indonesia, and because the Indonesian state had never fully accepted them on account of their being Chinese anyway. Additionally, they had never lived in China or were not fluent in Mandarin, and did not feel Chinese. In America, they were allowed to exist as “Chinese-Indonesian American citizens” and were not subject to forced assimilation; instead, they did so by choice.

The Indonesian language, though, continues to play a significant role in the preserving of Chinese-Indonesian culture, even as immigrants adjust to life in America. Despite my parents’ tendency to associate it with the anti-Chinese regime, sharing a common language still contributes to a strengthened sense of community that transcends even geographic barriers. As a child, I spoke with my parents in English, but still learned Bahasa Indonesia with my nanny, Mbak Tini. “We wanted you to be bilingual,” my mother said. “It was because you were speaking English every day. Mbak Tini accompanied you to play, and read, and sing songs like ‘*Ku Punya Anjing Kecil*’ [“I Have a Little Dog,” a children’s nursery song].” It was because of this language proficiency that I could still communicate with my grandparents and other extended family, who have limited knowledge of English. I may have never lived in Indonesia, but my parents knowingly passed on their Indonesian heritage to me by encouraging me to learn the language. The links to their culture did not simply dissolve because of their immigration, but were rather preserved within me, their only child. My father said, “Lots of people’s children can’t speak Indonesian anymore. Like one of our family friends. Her children, both of them can’t speak it; they can only speak English. It’s stupid. How can you do that?” He flung out his arms. “Then you’re a *kacang lupa kulit*” (“peanut that has forgotten its skin”—an Indonesia phrase for someone who assimilates so fully into another culture that they forget all aspects of the one they came from). My father was determined that I, at least, would not forget. This reflects the Chinese diaspora’s constant state of flux when it comes to identity; “transnational belonging . . . is embedded within the Chinese diasporic identity” (Lan 204). Despite my parents claiming they feel more connected to America nowadays, they continue to celebrate

Chinese holidays and speak nearly exclusively Bahasa Indonesia at home. Belonging to these three nations, Lan argues, is a “form of ‘ambiguous’ belonging to ease the feeling of being dispersed and alienated, as well as to restore the collective memory of the homeland” (204). Between failing to gain Mandarin fluency, being forced to speak only Bahasa Indonesia under the Suharto regime, and unexpectedly adopting English as a first language, their linguistic identity is indeed fractured, but it is through the culmination of all these languages that their sense of identity can be expressed.

**There are many ironies** to be found in the linguistic and national identities of Chinese-Indonesian immigrants. The outlawing of Mandarin distanced the Chinese-Indonesian community from the rest of Indonesia, rather than uniting the people. Despite immigrants’ insistence that speaking English makes them feel more attuned to America, parents urge their children to speak Bahasa Indonesia—the language that they were forced to adopt under Suharto’s brutal regime. Most also cannot speak Mandarin; instead of referring to themselves as nationally Chinese, they instead come to identify with the place to which they immigrated after 1998, because this was the one place where they were allowed to express both sides of their linguistic identity if they wished. The Indonesian language, passed down from generation to generation, continues to be the one that carries their heritage and history, even if they cease to feel nationally Indonesian due to racial discrimination. Fighting to keep a hold on Mandarin throughout the Suharto regime can be read as an act of Chinese nationalism, and careful preservation of the Indonesian language in overseas communities can be seen as an act of Indonesian nationalism. Chinese-Indonesians have adapted a “mixed” identity because of their history, but because of this, there is always a sense of peculiar disconnect.

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