

Research Article

Expressions of Nationalism Among Chinese Peranakan in Java's Rural Areas

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ORCIDArif Purnomo: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9209-8839>Ganda Febri Kurniawan: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1563-1249>**Abstract.**

This study examines the nationalist attitudes of the Chinese Peranakan community in rural Java, Indonesia, focusing on the community in Lasem. The research explores two key questions: how nationalism is expressed among the Chinese Peranakan in Lasem and what factors influence their sense of national identity. Using qualitative methods with an ethnographic approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Spradley's cultural content analysis model. The findings reveal that the Chinese Peranakan in Lasem possess a strong sense of nationalism, viewing Indonesia their homeland while maintaining cultural respect for the People's Republic of China (PRC) as their ancestral land. Their loyalty to Indonesia is shaped by three main factors: historical awareness, cultural accommodation, and the spirit of reform. The study concludes that their deep-rooted national identity serves as significant social capital, contributing to the development of social harmony and community cohesion.

Keywords: nationalism, Chinese Peranakan, cultural acculturation, Lasem

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1. Introduction

The Chinese have had a long-standing presence in the Indonesian archipelago, dating back centuries. Historical records indicate that the Chinese first became acquainted with the region during the journey of the monk Faxian, who traveled overland from China to India in AD 400. On his return voyage by sea, he visited Java in 414 AD. His travel writings, titled "Notes of Buddhist Countries," recount his experiences in several locations across Southeast Asia (1). During the Majapahit Kingdom (1293–1517), Chinese settlements were established, and the kingdom afforded this community a respected position. This period marked the beginning of close and cooperative relations between the Chinese and the Javanese in various aspects of social life. However, this harmony was disrupted during the colonial era under the Dutch East India Company (1602–1800) and later the Kingdom of the Netherlands (1800–1942). Colonial policies divided communities along lines of social class, religion, and ethnicity, designating the Chinese as a foreign group distinct



from the indigenous population. This divisive strategy fostered inter-ethnic tensions, which the Dutch exploited to maintain control over the archipelago (2)–(5). Even after Indonesia gained independence in 1945, remnants of these sentiments persisted. In some cases, the independent state perpetuated discriminatory practices, fueling further discourse around the role and rights of the Chinese community in Indonesian society. To this day, the Chinese are often perceived as a migrant group with limited claims to national identity, making their nationalism a topic of significant public debate, particularly in discussions related to ethnicity (6)–(8).

Anti-Chinese sentiment remains a troubling aspect of Indonesia's history, persisting even today. In major cities across Java—such as Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, Yogyakarta, and Semarang—the Chinese community has historically faced exclusion and suspicion. Their presence has often been viewed as a symbol of foreign domination and control within Indonesia (9)–(13). Notably, most Chinese living in Indonesia today is *Peranakan*—descendants who have intermarried with indigenous ethnic groups. However, this fact has often been overlooked, leaving the community vulnerable to outbreaks of anti-Chinese sentiment, as witnessed during the tragic events of 1965 and 1998. Under the New Order regime (1966–1998), the Chinese community experienced systemic marginalization and widespread discrimination in social, legal, and political domains. Their cultural practices were banned, and they were pressured to assimilate and conform to indigenous norms. This era represents one of the most extensive and enduring instances of cultural violence in Indonesia's post-independence history (14)–(16). The fall of the authoritarian New Order regime in 1998 ushered in the Reformation era, bringing renewed discussions about the Chinese community, particularly their nationalism. For the first time in decades, they could openly practice their religion, celebrate their culture, learn their history, gain recognition as citizens, and participate in a more equitable social life (17), (18). Despite ongoing discrimination and lingering sentiments, the Chinese *Peranakan* community remains steadfast in asserting Indonesia as their homeland, enduring constant questions about their nationalism while striving to be fully recognized as Indonesian citizens.

This research builds upon Suryadinata's study, which explores the persistent discrimination and violence faced by Chinese communities in Southeast Asia (19). Additionally, it draws from Adam's research on the collective memory of the Chinese community as an integral part of Indonesian society (20). Both studies have reignited public discourse on a topic often overlooked—the role of Chinese *Peranakan* in Indonesia's dynamic national life. Focusing specifically on the nationalism of Chinese *Peranakan*,

this research addresses a pressing issue currently debated in Indonesia. In rural Rembang, particularly in Lasem, the researchers uncovered a unique narrative that challenges prevailing stereotypes. Here, Chinese *Peranakan* have cultivated social harmony by collaborating closely with the Javanese community. They actively integrate into local social life without facing significant barriers, embracing the idea of Indonesia as a unity forged from diversity. For them, preserving this unity is a shared responsibility.

This study seeks to examine the expressions of nationalism among Chinese *Peranakan* in rural Rembang, offering a nuanced perspective on their integration into Indonesia's diverse social fabric. By exploring their sense of belonging and commitment to the nation, the research sheds light on how Chinese *Peranakan* navigate cultural, religious, and social dynamics in a rural setting like Lasem. This analysis is particularly significant in addressing the persistent questions surrounding the nationalism of Chinese *Peranakan* in Indonesian society, where historical prejudices and stereotypes often overshadow their contributions. The findings of this study highlight their role in fostering cultural and social harmony, challenging the dominant narratives of exclusion and otherness. In doing so, it provides an essential framework for understanding how tolerance and unity can thrive amidst diversity, contributing valuable insights to Indonesia's intellectual discourse on national identity and pluralism.

2. Research Method

The research employed qualitative methods with an ethnographic design (21), focusing on the cultural dynamics of the Chinese *Peranakan* community and their activities within society. Data sources included leaders from various segments of the Chinese community, such as traders, artisans, employees, and religious figures. A total of 12 key informants were selected using the snowball sampling method. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews (22), allowing the researchers to explore the subject matter comprehensively and in detail. To ensure data validity, the triangulation technique was used by comparing interview results from multiple informants (23). The data collection process resulted in four primary transcripts, coded for analysis as CPD1 (Chinese *Peranakan* Data 1), CPD2, and so on. Data analysis followed Spradley's model (24), beginning with domain analysis to identify key areas from the interview data. This was followed by taxonomic analysis, which organized the data into categories, and component analysis, where contrasting questions were used to refine and deepen the findings. Selected interviews were documented in detailed field notes. The final stage

was theme analysis, a holistic process to understand the broader patterns and cultural integration within the community. This approach aimed to uncover the underlying structures and relationships that define the *Peranakan* culture within the rural setting.

3. Results and Discussions

Lasem, situated on the border of East Java and Central Java, stands as a remarkable example of cultural integration and social harmony, with a history that reflects centuries of tolerance between the indigenous Javanese population and ethnic Chinese migrants. Though modest in size, this small town has emerged as a beacon of coexistence, where the interweaving of cultures has enriched both communities. Lasem has fostered strong relationships between Javanese natives and Chinese migrants, particularly in economic and social spheres, creating a dynamic and inclusive environment. This bond is evident in various aspects of daily life, from shared economic ventures, such as the town's renowned batik industry, to collaborative cultural celebrations that blend Javanese and Chinese traditions.

Moreover, Lasem's historical significance as a key trading hub during the Majapahit era and its role as a sanctuary for Chinese migrants during turbulent times have further solidified its reputation as a town where diversity thrives. The integration of Chinese *Peranakan* culture into local traditions has led to unique cultural expressions, including architectural styles, culinary innovations, and artistic collaborations. This harmonious relationship not only strengthens the social fabric of Lasem but also serves as a model for other communities in Indonesia, demonstrating how tolerance and mutual respect can sustain cultural diversity while promoting unity (25), (26). The Chinese *Peranakan*, descendants of Chinese migrants who have lived in the region for over ten generations, are deeply integrated into the local culture and society. Unlike *Totok* Chinese—those who maintain original cultural practices and primarily use Mandarin—the Chinese *Peranakan* have assimilated by adopting Indonesian or Javanese as their primary languages, with many in Lasem no longer fluent in Mandarin (10), (11), (7).

The integration of Chinese *Peranakan* into Lasem's community is further evidenced by the prevalence of mixed marriages, which have become a norm in the area (19), (27). Their sense of belonging to Indonesia is also reflected in their perspectives on national identity. For instance, an interviewee (CPD3) shared: "*We respect our ancestral culture, even though we cannot speak Mandarin. For us, Indonesia is a country we cannot abandon, even as we honor China as our ancestral land.*" This

sentiment underscores their commitment to Indonesia as their homeland. The Chinese *Peranakan* in Lasem not only view Indonesia as their home but also actively contribute to strengthening their sense of nationalism. They draw on history as a medium for fostering this identity, recalling their ancestors' contributions to resisting Dutch colonialism in the 18th century. These efforts, aimed at countering human exploitation and the exploitation of natural resources, highlight the historical role of the Chinese *Peranakan* in defending Indonesia's sovereignty (28).

Historical awareness plays a crucial role in fostering a strong sense of nationalism among the Chinese *Peranakan*. As CPD2 explains: *"We teach our children that Indonesia is our homeland through oral traditions, recounting historical stories about our ancestors who collaborated with Javanese, Madurese, Sundanese, and Arab communities to resist colonialism and Dutch imperialism in what was then called the Archipelago."* This awareness reflects the advanced understanding of nationalism held by the Chinese *Peranakan*, countering doubts from some groups regarding their patriotic authenticity. Another key historical narrative they share involves the active participation of the Chinese *Peranakan* in Indonesia's nationalist movement from 1908 to 1945 (29).

One widely recounted story, as highlighted by CPD3, underscores their contribution: *"We often tell our children about Liem Koen Hian, who refused to allow the newspaper he led, Sin Tit Po, to report on matches organized by the Nederlandsch Indische Voetbal Bond (NIVB), a football association founded by Europeans. This was a concrete demonstration of Chinese Peranakan support for Indonesia's independence movement."* Such historical narratives remain deeply embedded in Lasem society, where history is regarded as a unifying force, strengthening bonds within the Chinese *Peranakan* community and with other ethnic groups (30). Interestingly, the transmission of historical knowledge does not primarily occur in schools but within families and Chinese *Peranakan* associations. This process is free from religious or political biases, ensuring that the historical narratives are accessible to people from diverse backgrounds. In Lasem, this unique approach to socializing historical awareness has become a powerful cultural norm, binding the community together and reinforcing their shared sense of nationalism.

The cooperative relationship between the Chinese *Peranakan* and the Javanese in Lasem has deep historical roots. In religious life, they collaborate to build places of worship and support one another's practices, fostering a harmonious environment of mutual respect. Among the Chinese *Peranakan* in Lasem, Islam is the predominant

faith, regarded by many as an ancestral religion, particularly linked to the legacy of Admiral Cheng Ho. Cheng Ho is venerated as a heroic and ancestral figure, not only by Chinese Muslim *Peranakan* but also by those adhering to Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, or Buddhism. For all groups, his story remains a vital part of their heritage, passed down to future generations. Similarly, the Javanese in Lasem view the Chinese *Peranakan* as integral members of their community, showing great respect for them as fellow Indonesians (1), (31). This reciprocal regard extends to the Chinese *Peranakan*, who often refer to the Javanese as younger brothers, symbolizing their familial bond.

The long-standing interaction between the Javanese and Chinese *Peranakan* has resulted in unique cultural acculturation, rooted in a shared commitment to tolerance and acceptance of differences. This blend of cultures is prominently showcased during Chinese New Year celebrations in Lasem. As CPD4 explains: *“Cultural acculturation is particularly evident during the Chinese New Year festivities. The market, largely inhabited by Chinese, is adorned with thousands of lanterns, zodiac statues, and deity figures mixed with Javanese wayang characters, such as Wekudoro, Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong. The celebrations also feature Lion Dance performances alongside Javanese Reog Ponorogo and other traditional arts.”* Another notable acculturative practice is the distribution of *Gunungan*—mountain-shaped arrangements of food shared among people of various ethnicities. While *Gunungan* is rooted in Javanese culture, it has been embraced and incorporated by the Chinese *Peranakan* as part of their festivities. Similarly, the tradition of *Larung Sesaji*—a ritual of gratitude to the earth—is practiced by the Chinese *Peranakan*, adapted with typical Chinese foods and attributes like the color red (32), (33). Cultural acculturation also extends to architecture. The Kauman Islamic Boarding School (*Pesantren Kauman*), a traditional center of Islamic education, features Chinese-inspired architectural elements and integrates Chinese philosophy into its teachings. This *pesantren* stands as a powerful symbol of tolerance and a tangible representation of cultural integration within the broader Lasem community.

During the New Order military regime (1966–1998), all forms of Chinese culture were prohibited in Indonesia (17). This ban was formalized through Presidential Instruction (Inpres) Number 14 of 1967, which restricted Chinese religious activities, beliefs, and customs. The regulation led to widespread discrimination against the Chinese community, marginalizing them from social interaction. According to CPD3: *“At the time, many Chinese Peranakan faced acts of violence because we were fundamentally seen as foreigners. We were forced to integrate with society, yet the community*

stigmatized and hated us.” This era of violence left a lasting scar on state relations with the Chinese population. Many Chinese businesses were attacked and looted by mobs, and individuals were forced to adopt Indonesian-sounding names, abandoning their Chinese heritage. As CPD2 recounts: *“My father’s original name was A Liong, but he had to change it to Sosro Sudarmo to ensure our safety, as mandated by the state.”*

Anti-Chinese sentiment was deeply ingrained and perpetuated by state institutions, even though the Chinese *Peranakan* had socially assimilated and practiced cultural norms similar to the indigenous population. The cultural suppression and systemic discrimination persisted until 1998, when the New Order regime was brought down by widespread student protests and pro-democracy movements. Following the fall of Suharto’s regime, Presidential Instruction Number 14 of 1967 was revoked, and the Chinese *Peranakan* regained the freedom to practice their religion, traditions, and cultural heritage (9), (34). The fall of the New Order marked the beginning of Indonesia’s reform era, ushering in a renewed spirit of democracy and inclusivity. Despite being victims of violence during the turbulent transition of power from Suharto to President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie in 1998, the Chinese *Peranakan* in Lasem viewed the reform era as a pivotal moment in their lives. For them, it symbolized an opportunity to resist racial discrimination and embrace a stronger sense of nationalism. As CPD1 reflects: *“Reform is a turning point for entering a new era of democracy and nationalism in Indonesia. It must be preserved. During this reform period, we were able to revive and practice the culture of our ancestors, which was previously banned under the New Order regime.”* For the Chinese *Peranakan*, the reform era not only restored their cultural identity but also strengthened their commitment to Indonesia’s unity and diversity.

This research aligns with and reinforces Suryadinata’s study (31), which highlights that Chinese communities in Southeast Asia continue to face strong sentiments from those identifying as “native ethnicities.” However, such sentiments have not diminished the nationalism and dedication of the Chinese toward their respective nations. Similarly, this study supports Adam’s assertion (20), that racism and discrimination against the Chinese have not weakened their national spirit, as they are socially integrated into the lives of indigenous populations. Their unwavering national commitment and solidarity are evident in their active involvement in fostering social harmony within their communities. The findings also align with Christian’s perspective (35) which posits that the cultural identity of Chinese in Indonesia has seamlessly blended into the broader social identity of the community. Cultural acculturation stands as tangible evidence that the Chinese *Peranakan* regard Indonesia as their homeland, embracing Indonesian

culture as their own. Furthermore, this research challenges and disproves the notion that the nationalism of Chinese *Peranakan* toward the Indonesian state is questionable. On the contrary, the study underscores their profound attachment to the nation, which is continually strengthened through their historical awareness, cultural accommodation, and the enduring spirit of reform.

4. Conclusion

The nationalism of Chinese *Peranakan* in Indonesia remains a subject of debate, largely due to the lingering anti-Chinese sentiment rooted in the authoritarian New Order regime. However, findings from this study in Lasem present a contrasting narrative. The Chinese *Peranakan* community in this region demonstrates a strong sense of nationalism and civic awareness that merits recognition. They actively contribute to fostering social harmony and see themselves as authentic Indonesians with equal rights and responsibilities as other citizens.

Their nationalism is evident in cultural practices that incorporate elements of Javanese culture, creating traditions that are accessible and appreciated by other ethnic groups in Lasem. This integration allows the Chinese *Peranakan* culture to be embraced by the broader community, fostering a sense of shared cultural identity. While they honor China as their ancestral homeland, they firmly regard Indonesia as their true homeland. Three key factors—historical awareness, cultural accommodation, and the spirit of reform—shape their sense of nationalism. These elements not only dispel doubts about the Chinese *Peranakan*'s loyalty to Indonesia but also highlight their critical role in strengthening national unity.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how minority groups like the Chinese *Peranakan* navigate nationalism in the face of historical discrimination. It highlights the importance of inclusive cultural practices in fostering unity and provides a model for how diverse communities can coexist harmoniously. Policymakers and educators can draw from these findings to promote tolerance and integrate minority contributions into national narratives. This study is limited by its focus on a specific community in Lasem, which may not fully represent the experiences of Chinese *Peranakan* in other regions of Indonesia. Future research should explore similar dynamics in urban and rural contexts across the country to provide a broader understanding of their nationalism. Additionally, longitudinal studies could investigate how these attitudes evolve over time in response to changing socio-political landscapes.

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