

Nation State and Transnational Chinese Community in the Cold War: China and Indonesia, 1955-1965

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This paper plans to look at the history of Sino-Indonesian relations in the 1950s and 1960s through the intersection between the ethnical and national identity of individuals and the formation of state diplomacy. It aims to go beyond the nation-state-centered narratives of the existing scholarship on the topic, and to explore instead the fluidity of personal identity as well as the significance of human agency in international relations.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the overseas Chinese community was the bridge through which the Chinese diplomatic apparatus carried out Beijing's general policy doctrine in Indonesia. The group included Chinese minority intellectuals and entrepreneurs surrounding Sukarno, leftwing students in the Chinese Schools who found their way to serve the People's Republic with their local knowledge and language skills, and the ethnic Chinese community leaders who functioned as mediators between the local Chinese societies and the PRC consulates. Both PRC diplomats and Chinese minorities were sojourners isolated from mainstream assimilation and acceptance. The shared identification with linguistically, culturally, and ethnically defined "Chineseness" provided the two groups with a common space of social interaction. Yet what made the PRC diplomats' mobilization of resources from the local Chinese community particularly problematic is the fact that the dominant position of the Chinese minority in the Indonesia's national economy has long been resented by the non-Chinese majority. The image of the PRC in Indonesia thus became a deeply paradoxical one: It was the homeland of the bourgeois Chinese businessmen who exploited local people as well as the Communist state that conspired to ignite revolution abroad. By studying this paradoxical image, the paper wishes to examine the tension between "Chinese" as a signifier of transnational ethnic recognition and the "People's Republic of China" as a territorialized nation-state.