

HOW MANY CHINESE INDONESIANS?

Jamie Mackie

Australian National University

Until the census of 2000, no attempt had been made since the 1930 census to elicit data from Indonesians about their ethnicity. The 2000 census question on the subject was necessarily based on self-identification. However, the very low figure recorded for ethnic Chinese Indonesians implies that large numbers of them chose not to identify themselves as such, probably because of fears aroused by outbreaks of anti-Chinese violence in 1998. The 2000 census figure of only 1.8 million Chinese, less than 1% of the total population (or 1.4 % according to a proposed adjustment) seems far too low to be credible. In 1930 Chinese Indonesians represented about 2% of the total, and they have generally been assumed since then to amount to 2-3% of the population. This note examines the key variables relevant to that assumption, which seems likely to be nearer the truth than the recent census figure.

It has been impossible until recently to estimate with any precision how many ethnic Chinese there are in Indonesia. No census since 1930 has attempted to obtain information about people's ethnicity (as Javanese, Bataks, Balinese, 'Chinese' and so on) until the 2000 census. That has meant we have had to work with very hazy estimates of the size of each such group, especially the Chinese.¹ The 2000 census provided us with fuller data on ethnicity than anything we have had since 1930. However, it is severely flawed in the case of the Chinese, because of the vast but unmeasurable extent of 'category jumping'—i.e. reporting one's ethnicity in a category other than Chinese—for reasons examined below. If future censuses can by any means improve on the 2000 census data (which I doubt), we may eventually get closer to the truth on this delicate but socially important issue. But until then we must keep relying essentially on guesswork, well informed or poorly.

The number of Indonesians of ethnic Chinese descent has generally been thought to amount to around five or six million in recent years, or about 2-3% of the total population. Some estimates have put it higher: Adam Malik suggested about 5% of the population in 1973 (Suryadinata *et al.* 2003: 73), and foreign

¹I use the word 'Chinese' here with reference to the ethnic identity of that group, although we should more correctly be calling them Chinese Indonesians for normal purposes (or preferably Sino-Indonesians, by analogy with the word Sino-Thai, now a well-accepted term), since nearly all of them now regard themselves essentially as Indonesian nationals, not Chinese. The word 'Chinese' ought to be used only as an adjective, a qualifier, not a noun. This matter is important, since the connotations and denotation are otherwise simply racial, not a matter of nationality, citizenship, 'loyalties' or socio-cultural identification.

observers have sometimes regarded this as an authoritative, reliably based figure, although it could not possibly have been so. But few estimates had put the proportion much below 3% until the 2000 census figure was published. Yet that figure, 1.83 million ethnic Chinese, amounts to only about 0.9% of the total population. Even an adjustment suggested by Suryadinata *et al.* (2003: 78–9) takes the 2000 census figure only to about 2.9 million, which represents less than 1.4%, signifying an annual growth rate since 1930 of 1.23% per annum.² Both figures seem to me to be far too low to be taken at face value just because their authority is derived from a census report. But rather than delve more deeply into the assumptions and computations involved here, which I must leave to the demographers, I think it is worth looking baldly at what we do and do not know about the population history of Indonesia's Chinese minority since 1930.

The 1930 census figure of 1.23 million (slightly over 2% of the population) was less than perfect, but more likely to be fairly accurate than any other we have.³ An estimate for 1961 was later made by G.W. Skinner (a meticulous and authoritative anthropologist specialising on the Chinese of Southeast Asia), on the basis of annual registrations, of how rapidly that number might be assumed to have increased over the following 30 years. He came up with a plausible figure for 1961 of between 2.3 and 2.6 million, or about 2.4% to 2.7% of the total population—most probably, he believed, around 2.45 million, or 2.5% of the total (Skinner 1963). Since then we have been able to do little more than assume that the rate of increase in the ethnic Chinese population has roughly approximated the (varying) rates of natural increase of the Indonesian population as a whole—perhaps slightly exceeding it from the 1950s to the 1970s, but falling behind it since then for reasons we will notice below. On that basis the general assumption that the Chinese represented between 2% and 3% of the total population has seemed as reliable as any we could hope for. But the census count in 2000 and even the adjusted estimate by Suryadinata *et al.* mentioned above are substantially out of line with this assumption. And since the census result depended on the self-assessments of respondents as to their ethnicity, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that both those figures are simply far too low.

We can safely make some reasonable guesses about the magnitudes of the three key variables affecting the rate of growth of the Chinese minority in Indonesia since 1930: i.e. birth rates, death rates and net migration. They provide little reason for concluding that the Chinese form a rapidly declining proportion of the total population (as their counterparts in Malaysia appear to be). To take the last of those variables first, immigration from China ceased almost entirely after the 1930s depression and has been negligible since 1949 (despite a trickle of illegal immigration, impossible even to guess at), when both the communist government in Beijing and the newly independent Indonesian government imposed

²This article does not purport to be a review of the useful survey by Suryadinata *et al.* (2003) of the census data on a previously not well-researched topic. Their study is particularly interesting for its intriguingly diverse age-pyramids for the various ethnic groups in different provinces. But their puzzling estimate of the size of the Chinese ethnic group has led me to suggest an alternative approach to that question.

³Even the 1930 census was not based on full enumeration of the population outside Java, but simply on officials' estimates.

near-complete bans on it. Since then some Chinese from Indonesia (still widely self-identified as Chinese nationals and so regarded by most Indonesians until the dual nationality issue was resolved in 1963) may have returned to China or gone to the Netherlands or elsewhere, mainly in the 1950s and 1960s. The cumulative total is unknown, however. About 100,000 were repatriated to China in 1960–61 at an unusual time of serious tension between the two countries over an Indonesian government regulation banning Chinese shop-houses from rural areas (Mackie 1976: 92). Ships were sent from China to 'bring them home', so the numbers who went were reasonably well recorded. It is noteworthy, however, that no such large outflow to China has occurred since then, even after the two worst periods of anti-Chinese hostility in Indonesia in 1965–67 and 1998, although many left and later returned.

There has been a small but steady trickle of Chinese leaving Indonesia for other countries since the 1960s, mainly students leaving to study abroad and not returning, or businessmen seeking greener pastures overseas. This may conceivably have been sufficient to have made a cumulatively significant impact on the rate of natural increase of the ethnic Chinese population in Indonesia over the past 40 or 50 years. But I doubt if it has been a substantial impact, except perhaps since the 1997–98 financial crisis—in which case it is unlikely to have yet reduced the Chinese proportion of the total population more than marginally.

Of the other two key variables, birth rates and death rates, it can almost certainly be assumed that most Chinese in Indonesia, apart from those in poorer rural communities in Kalimantan and parts of Sumatra, would have been able to afford better access to good medical facilities than most other Indonesians—and probably have had a better diet—so that their aggregate mortality rates would have been lower than those of the total population, especially in the early post-independence decades. But health facilities for Indonesians generally have improved greatly since the Puskesmas (*pusat kesehatan masyarakat*, community health centres) and other schemes were introduced in the 1970s, so that gap has probably narrowed slightly since then.

Whether Chinese birth rates have been higher or lower on average than those of other Indonesians is more problematic. My own impression in the late 1950s was that there were often many more children in well-off Chinese families than in indigenous Indonesian ones, mainly because their medical care was better; hence a higher proportion of them would have survived into adulthood and then had children themselves. (I was often struck by how many Chinese families had seven or eight children, sometimes up to ten or more—as did a few indigenous families, but not nearly so many, since more of their children died young.) On the other hand, when family planning came into vogue in the 1970s and contraception became readily accessible, it was probably adopted more rapidly by urbanised, well-educated Chinese Indonesians than by poorer rural or urban indigenous Indonesians. So it is almost certainly the case that while birth rates were higher among the Chinese from 1930 until about the 1970s or later, they may have become lower since then (as also have their death rates throughout). All of this implies that the overall rate of population increase of the Chinese would have been considerably higher than the national average for those first 40 years after 1930, thus pushing the proportion of Chinese up well above the 2% figure of 1930. It may have slipped back since the 1970s, with rates of natural increase falling

recently below rates for indigenous Indonesians, which have themselves been gradually declining.⁴

But unless we can get some figures that will enable us to quantify those trends, we can say little more about the rate of growth of the Chinese minority—except that it is hard to imagine any reason why the Chinese proportion of the population would have fallen to as low as the suggested 1.5 to 2%, unless there has been a much more dramatic decline in Chinese fertility rates or rise in emigration rates than we have been aware of. Hence the reluctance of many Chinese Indonesians to report their ethnicity as Chinese seems indubitably to be the main part of the explanation.

Turning now to the 2000 census figures and their reliability, there are two major problems about the figures given for the ethnic Chinese population. One has to do with the issue of 'Who is Chinese?' The only feasible way of dealing with that was to rely on self-identification, since any other way of deciding whether someone was Chinese or Malay, Javanese, or half-Chinese and so on, would have been impossibly difficult and conceptually fraught with problems. And it has been widely reported that many Chinese were reluctant to declare themselves as such, at a time not long after horrendous race riots in 1998, through fears of many kinds, rational or irrational. But whether the non-reporting Chinese numbered only a small proportion or vastly more in any region, or nationally, is quite unknown and unknowable. Suryadinata *et al.* have made calculations on the basis of three assumptions about that, a very reasonable procedure, but perhaps too limited a one. Moreover, the published BPS data they rely on deal with only 11 of Indonesia's 30 provinces, in each of which the Chinese ranked among the eight largest ethnic groups.⁵ In the remaining 19 provinces, the Chinese were (surprisingly, in some cases) not in the top eight, and apparently a relatively small fraction of the total number of ethnic Chinese, around 15%. Astonishingly, North Sumatra, with its large Chinese community in Medan, was not listed among these 11 provinces. The Suryadinata *et al.* chapter makes a set of plausible assumptions about the numbers there, but the problem of under-recording remains a major difficulty.

There may be various reasons for the under-recording, apart from the fears of many Chinese about declaring themselves as such so soon after the 1998 violence against them. Public trust in the confidentiality of census data is not high in any country, and certainly not in Indonesia. Faulty coding is another possibility (but probably too minor to account for much of the discrepancy); the reluctance of mixed-race, part-Chinese to declare themselves as Chinese yet another, although the numbers of these are not yet likely to be large, as they are in Thailand. But

⁴According to Professor Terry Hull of the Australian National University, the National Family Planning Agency (BKKBN) surveys of Chinese fertility rates and use of family planning (*keluarga berencana*, KB) techniques in the 1970s revealed high initial fertility rates, but also more rapid adoption of KB than the national average. Those data may be still available, he believes.

⁵While the figures for the ethnic Chinese in those 19 provinces were not published in printed form by BPS, I am told they are readily available in electronic form (Professor Terry Hull, personal communication).

these latter considerations are of minor significance compared to the known fact of extensive reluctance to be listed as Chinese.

One important conclusion to be drawn from this story is that in a matter of this kind it is a mistake to be beguiled by numbers such as census data, which imply a spurious degree of precision about a matter that depends so crucially on self-identification, and the circumstances that influence it. There is much more to be said about the problems that arise over the identity dilemmas of Chinese Indonesians than we can delve into here. But what is abundantly clear is that those problems militate against any search for precise and tidy numbers.

So we will be on safer ground, in my view, if we simply continue to say that the total number of Chinese Indonesians is probably somewhere in the order of five to six million (possibly, but most improbably, even approaching seven), but for the moment we simply have no way of knowing better than that. More accurate data on birth and death rates, or net migration rates, of ethnic Chinese over the past half-century might help us to narrow the range of these guesses slightly, and even better would be some means of ensuring more reliable self-identification in any future census questions about ethnicity — an impossible dream, I suspect. But let us not delude ourselves that figures of this kind can ever be much more than well-informed guesses.

REFERENCES

- Mackie, J.A.C. (1976), 'Anti-Chinese Outbreaks in Indonesia, 1959-68', in J.A.C. Mackie (ed.), *The Chinese in Indonesia: Five Essays*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, and Nelson, Melbourne, in association with the Australian Institute of International Affairs.
- Skinner, G.W. (1963), 'The Chinese Minority', in Ruth T. McVey (ed.), *Indonesia, Southeast Asia Studies*, Yale University, New Haven, by arrangement with HRAF Press: 97-101.
- Suryadinata, Leo, Evi Nurvidya Arifin and Aris Ananta (eds) (2003), *Indonesia's Population: Ethnicity and Religion in a Changing Political Landscape*, Indonesia's Population Series No. 1, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore.