A genocide that never was: explaining the myth of anti-Chinese massacres in Indonesia, 1965–66

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Many publications refer incorrectly to extensive massacres of Chinese in Indonesia in 1965–66. Approximately half a million people were killed in this period, but the victims were overwhelmingly members and associates of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Chinese Indonesians experienced serious harassment but relatively few were killed. The persistence of this myth is attributed to a trope dating back to the seventeenth century which equates the social position of Chinese in Indonesia with that of Jews in Europe and which thus predicts periodic pogroms and attempts at genocide. The myth has survived partly because it inspires a sense of urgency in combating discrimination against Chinese Indonesians, but it encourages a misunderstanding of the causes of intense violence in Indonesia and raises serious moral issues concerning genocide denial by substitution.

In a voice-over accompanying film footage of a Chinese man lighting joss sticks in a Chinese temple in Jakarta in the late 1980s, Jack Pizzey intones:

In Indonesia the Chinese still pray for safety. Mr Ling hasn’t forgotten the time twenty years ago when hundreds of thousands of his people, perhaps millions, were butchered by Indonesians ... There’s a saying here that it is necessary to cull the Chinese every fifty years.¹

Not all representations of anti-Chinese prejudice and violence in Indonesia are adorned with aphorisms as chilling as the injunction to cull an ethnic group at regular intervals, but Pizzey’s presentation is part of a long tradition of reference to a major event in Southeast Asian history which actually never took place. That event, or rather non-event, was the massacre of huge numbers of Chinese in Indonesia in the aftermath of a power struggle in Jakarta which led to the fall of Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno, the rise to power of a new president, General Suharto, and the destruction of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) which had been until that time the largest communist party in the non-communist world.

The misperception of a massacre of Chinese Indonesians in 1965 is both enduring and widespread. It is to be found in sober journalism intended to shape public
understanding of the world, in guidebooks intended to inform visitors to Indonesia, in policy papers, on the internet, and even in serious academic writing. The persistence of this misperception is remarkable because it is thoroughly out of step with the analytical consensus of scholars who work on Indonesian history and who have examined the empirical evidence relating to the massacres. That consensus leaves no room for doubt: the overwhelming majority of victims in the 1965–66 massacres were indigenous Indonesians who were identified for slaughter by their association with the PKI. Although some thousands of victims out of the total death toll—likely to have been in the vicinity of 500,000—were “innocent,” that is to say, they were not on the left and were killed out of mistaken identity or because of private antagonisms unrelated to the big political issues of the day, there is simply no evidence for a special targeting of Chinese for murder during this period.

This misperception both leads observers into a serious misunderstanding of political and ethnic dynamics in modern Indonesia and raises serious moral issues about our responsibilities to the victims of past violence. In this article, therefore, we seek to confront the misperception directly. We first outline the events in 1965 as they are currently known, explaining why a political massacre, not an ethnic pogrom, was to be expected in 1965. Second, we attempt to map the extent of the misperception about 1965 and to identify the (mistaken) assumptions about Indonesian society and politics that underlie it. And third, we reflect on the moral and intellectual importance of confronting what has become a form of blood libel on Indonesia.

1965, Indonesia, and Chinese Indonesians

The massacres of 1965–66 were the terrible sequel to a coup in the Indonesian capital Jakarta early on the morning of October 1, 1965. Although the identity of the coup plotters, beyond the junior army officers who actually carried it out, has long been debated, recent research indicates that the coup plot was hatched between those young officers and a small group within the Indonesian Communist Party, including the chairman, D.N. Aidit, but excluding other members of the politburo and, of course, excluding the rank and file of the party. The immediate aim of the coup was the removal (by kidnapping) of seven senior anti-communist generals perceived to stand in the way of communist power. This removal was expected to lead to a decisive shift in national politics and to the irreversible hegemony of the Party. The kidnappings were intended as the catalyst for a major political change, but were not in themselves a grab for power at the national level. The coup failed, at very least because the plotters were unable to adapt creatively to the fluid circumstances after the kidnapping. Six of the generals were killed (raising the stakes in the action still higher), key locations were not seized or were abandoned, and key elements of political support were not secured. Within 24 hours, effective counter-measures by a senior surviving general, Suharto, had ended every chance of the coup’s success.
The focus of Suharto’s actions shifted swiftly from suppressing the coup to ensuring a consolidation of power by non-communist forces in Indonesia. He engaged in a complex battle of wills and strategy with President Sukarno which ended in 1967 with Sukarno’s removal as president and the installation of Suharto’s so-called New Order regime which remained in power until 1998. For approximately five months, from late October 1965 to early March 1966, a horrific series of massacres took place in many parts of the country, especially Central and East Java, Bali and North Sumatra. Surprisingly little is known about these massacres. In many parts of Indonesia, the killings are almost wholly undocumented, though there has been some attempt since the fall of Suharto to begin collecting individual testimonies. The scale of killing and its reported pattern varied widely from province to province. As a result, we have a multitude of overlapping explanatory paradigms, often with a significant speculative element. Many killings were carried out in what amounted to local civil wars between or within villages. Many others were carried out by civilian militias, especially those associated with Islamic organizations. Militias often, but not always, collaborated with anti-communist military units, sometimes operating with military authorization, sometimes with training and direction. Army units themselves carried out many killings. In some regions whole hamlets were expunged from the map; in others, it was as if the population passed through a sieve which systematically removed leftist elements; in others again, the purge seemed to be an excuse to seize the property of party activists; in other places there were few or no killings at all. In some reports, it seemed that a sudden panic had engulfed Indonesian society, leading people into unaccustomed savagery against neighbours who had suddenly become enemies. In other reports, the killings seemed to be the culmination of decades of social and ideological tension. In still others, the violence had an air of clinical extermination, as if both sides were calmly carrying through a script that had been determined by history.

Despite this diversity of explanations for the killings, there is a clear consensus amongst historians of Indonesia on two key points: that this massacre took place on a vast scale, claiming hundreds of thousands of victims, and that those victims were defined above all by their association with the PKI. Both these characteristics of the massacre were a consequence of the fact that Indonesia seemed to everyone at the time to be facing an elemental choice between leftist and rightist paths to the future. A stream of Marxist thought had been present in Indonesian nationalist thinking since the early 1920s. Marxist ideas had influence well beyond the limits of the Communist Party and many nationalists, including Sukarno, believed that it would be possible to create a national ideology integrating Marxism with other streams of thought, including Islam, and to include the PKI as a cooperative force within the Indonesian political system. Powerful forces within the Party agreed with this analysis and the PKI’s doctrine of the dual aspect of the state prefigured the participation of the so-called Eurocommunists in parliamentary systems in Western Europe. By 1965, however, few Indonesians believed that this kind of accommodation was still possible. The Party had become more demanding of social change and shriller in its denunciation of enemies such as
“capitalist bureaucrats” and “village devils,” and conservative Indonesians had become increasingly convinced that a communist-dominated government would mean fundamental and far-reaching changes in Indonesian society. For some on the anti-communist side, October 1965 was a moment of extreme urgency, when every possible measure had to be taken—even to the extent of mass murder—to destroy communism as a political force in Indonesia. For others, it was a time of revenge when old political scores could be evened. But no one was in any doubt that the political landscape of Indonesia would be utterly transformed once the killing was over.

Chinese were not immune to this violence. Members and associates of the Chinese organization Baperki (Badan Permusyawaratan Kewarganegaraan Indonesia, lit. Consultative Body on Indonesian Citizenship), which was generally considered to be part of the constellation of mass organizations around the PKI, were rounded up and some were killed. Some Chinese may have been targeted because of the PKI’s increasingly close relationship with the ruling Chinese Communist Party in mainland China. The Party, however, had been careful not to allow itself to be seen as a party of the Chinese and there were no Chinese Indonesians in its leadership. Although Baperki claimed up to 250,000 members, the general perception of the time was that Chinese were disengaged from politics. In a time of political violence, this disengagement gave them a certain immunity. Although one of the common criticisms of the Chinese was that they failed to show commitment to their adoptive country by participating in politics, this lack of participation seems to have been an advantage in 1965. “We did not kill the Chinese then,” commented one Muslim leader. “This was an affair between Javanese.”

An important additional reason for the relatively low death rate amongst Chinese Indonesians in this time of blood was lack of opportunity. On May 14, 1959 the Indonesian government had revoked the licences of “alien” (non-citizen) Chinese to operate retail businesses in the countryside. As a result, some 85,000 traders and their families were forced to move to the district capitals. This discriminatory measure meant that in 1965 these Chinese were generally not present in the countryside where the vast majority of killings took place. The measure did not apply formally to the larger number of Chinese who were Indonesian citizens, but in practice these Chinese Indonesians were often subjected to the new rule.

There have been reports of the mass killing of Chinese in only three regions: In December 1965, what began as a demonstration against the Chinese consulate in the North Sumatra city of Medan turned into a riot in which as many as 200 Chinese may have been killed. The mass killing of Chinese in Kebumen in Central Java and in the island of Lombok, east of Bali, has been reported, but neither case has been investigated to uncover local social or political factors to explain this distinct phenomenon or even to confirm the details of the events. Aside from these events, the killing of Chinese appears to have taken the form of individual murders, many of them recorded in the daily reports of the People’s Republic of China newsagency Hsinhua (now Xinhua). Summarizing
the anti-Chinese activities of the previous months in June 1966, the Chinese embassy addressed the new military government accusingly, stating:

you have mobilized troops and organized hooligans to burn and wreck the shops of chinese [sic; Hsinhua despatches were without capitals] nationals, loot their property, forcibly occupy their schools, organizations and enterprises everywhere, unwarrantedly arrest and barbarously beat them and even savagely murder several hundreds of them.13

Coppel concluded in 1983 that “the total number of Chinese killed can scarcely have exceeded two thousand.”14 No evidence has emerged since that time to cast doubt on his judgment.15

Arguing that there was no genocide of Chinese in Indonesia in 1965–66 is not to suggest that there was little or no violence against them. On the contrary, this was an exceedingly difficult time for Chinese Indonesians, many of whom suffered greatly. Hsinhua reports record a thousand Chinese driven from their homes in Bali and thousands more put to flight in Sumatra, especially in Aceh,16 wild demonstrations calling for the expulsion of all Chinese,17 the smashing and looting of Chinese shops and houses in more than a dozen cities (2,000 Chinese shops were said to have been destroyed in Makassar),18 the beating of teachers and students at Chinese schools,19 attacks on the Chinese embassy and Chinese consulate buildings (“the hooligans even smashed a bust of the chinese people’s beloved leader chairman mao tse-tung”),20 the rape of Chinese girls21 and plundering of the possessions of Chinese refugees.22 In the aftermath of the coup, some thousands of ethnic Chinese, most of them Chinese citizens, left the country. For some the departure amounted to expulsion: the new government put them under direct pressure to leave. These evacuees were herded into detention camps, often in difficult conditions and occasionally maltreated before Chinese ships came to collect them.23 For others pressure was less official. Time magazine wrote:

Many of Indonesia’s 2,500,000 resident Chinese fear that the anti-Communism that began with the failure of last October’s Red coup will end in a Chinese bloodbath. Chinese merchants’ shops are regularly looted, many Chinese schools have been closed, and last week the government banned all Chinese-language newspapers. Although few of the late Partai Komunis Indonesia’s members were Chinese, many Indonesians harbor resentment against the overseas Chinese who dominate the nation’s commerce. Peking itself has protested against anti-Chinese demonstrations in North Sumatra, where “right-wing hooligans armed with iron bars, hatchets and other lethal weapons rabidly attacked shops and stores owned by Chinese nationals”.24

Where is the myth found?

Most of the evidence of the myth seems to indicate that it is of Western non-scholarly origin. It was then apparently picked up by some scholars who were not specialists on Indonesia. More recently (mainly in the 1990s) it spread to Chinese outside Indonesia especially through the medium of web sites and internet discussion groups. It seems to be largely absent from Indonesian discussions of the 1965 massacres.
The myth of a massacre of Chinese Indonesians in 1965 is to be found in a wide range of publications, scholarly and non-scholarly. In this section we begin by presenting samples of such writings from several categories as evidence of the scope of the problem.

An article in the Australian edition of *Life* in 1968 speaks of “centuries-old racial antagonisms” afflicting the Chinese in Southeast Asia:

Their plight is historic. Spaniards in the Philippines permitted the massacre of 23,000 Chinese whom they suspected of subversion in 1603 and of 30,000 more in 1639. The Dutch in Indonesia, fearing the economic power of Chinese middlemen, allowed Malay mobs to kill 10,000 Chinese in 1740. In 1965, as one consequence of an abortive Communist coup, Indonesians massacred, among others, hundreds of thousands of Chinese.25

Britain’s respected *Sunday Times*:

In Thailand and Burma, Chinese merchants kept a low profile and paid off generals and politicians with generosity. In the Philippines, ethnic Chinese intoxicated by Maoism were blamed for inspiring a decades-long communist guerrilla campaign. And when Suharto came to power during Indonesia’s “year of living dangerously” from 1965 to 1966, more than half a million alleged communists, mainly Chinese, were massacred.26

And in the *International Herald Tribune*:

Race riots are nothing new to Indonesia. After the carnage in 1965 against ethnic Chinese during and after the coup that brought President Suharto to power, came riots against the Japanese in 1974. For many years, the Chinese have been the repeated targets of mob rage across Indonesia, in racial flare-ups that mostly failed to gain international attention.27

The perception of a massacre of Chinese is found in policy documents whose aim is to influence government policy and to guide public activism. A recent report of the Minority Rights Group on the Southeast Asian Chinese states with apparent concern for the accuracy of empirical detail:

There are still no precise figures on the number of Chinese killed, but the figure is likely to be in the hundreds of thousands,28 adding in an endnote:

Some commentators put the number of casualties among the Chinese at tens of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands.29

The Lonely Planet guidebook to Indonesia offers its readers the following:

Whenever there is unrest in Indonesia, for whatever reason, the Chinese are often singled out. In 1965 they were killed for being communists; more recently they have been killed for being capitalists.30

The Internet has become a significant forum in which the myth of Chinese massacres in 1965 is repeated:

1965 Oct 20, Mass arrests of communists took place in Indonesia. Some 500,000 Chinese Indonesians were killed in anti-Communist riots in this year. Laws restricting Chinese
culture were later established, reportedly to promote assimilation and protect Chinese
Indonesians. . . . The laws included a ban on publicly celebrating the Chinese New Year.
An estimated 300,000 Communists were massacred by the army in immediate and later
reprisals in Indonesia after an attempted overthrow of the government in 1965.31

The myth has now become well established in internet discussions amongst overseas Chinese, for instance:

The cataclysmic events in Indonesia are presented in terms of a single man losing his grip on
power after 32 years. But few reports have detailed the brutal attacks on ethnic Chinese,
despite the fact that we are seeing an anti-Chinese pogrom that shockingly recalls 1965,
when over 250,000 ethnic Chinese Indonesians were massacred.32

Belief in the occurrence of a massacre in 1965–66 has become an article of faith
amongst many overseas Chinese. Scholars of Indonesia who attempt publicly to
refute the belief have been accused of genocide denial.33

Britannica refers to:

a right wing military coup in Indonesia toppled the Sukarno regime and led to the massacre
of an estimated 500,000 members and supporters of the pro-Peking Indonesian Communist
Party, its genocidal fury extending to the considerable non-Communist Chinese commu-
nity.34

Most serious of all, however, is the extent to which references to a massacre of
Chinese can be found in serious scholarly writing. Yahuda refers to “the bloody
massacre of hundreds of thousands of [PKI] members and of local ethnic
Chinese”; Labini to a massacre of half a million Chinese in 1965; van der
Kroef to “anti-Chinese . . . pogroms.”35

Even the eminent historian of China and Southeast Asia, Wang Gungwu, wrote
in 2002 in a widely syndicated newspaper article:

Despite memories of the slaughter of Chinese during the anti-communist purges of the
1960s, Indonesia’s Chinese were unprepared for the intense hatred shown in the riots of
May 1998.36

In 2002, the introduction to a collection of articles on the violence in Indonesia,
published in the journal Asian Survey, commented on “the killing [in 1965–66]
of what is usually estimated at around half a million people, many of whom
happened also to be ethnic Chinese.”37 This comment was notable for the fact
that one of the other articles in the collection explicitly rejected the proposition
that Chinese had been a major victim group in 1965–66.38 Sometimes a massacre
of Chinese is implied, rather than stated explicitly. In a section headed “The mas-
sacres,” Cribb and Brown note: “In the cities of the archipelago, many Chinese fell
victims to the PKI’s association with the People’s Republic of China,” though the
context of the comment suggests that Chinese were a relatively small proportion of
the victims.39

In the field of genocide studies, too, we find repeated, generally incidental,
references to massacres of Chinese in 1965. Harff and Gurr, for instance,
identifying Indonesia in 1965–66 as a “repressive/xenophobic” genocide, describe the victims simply as “Communists, Chinese.” \(^{40}\) Weitz states:

On the basis of the existing definition … the regime in Indonesia could not be accused of genocide for the roughly 500,000 people it killed in 1965 because they were purportedly communists. The charge of genocide would be operative only if it could be shown that they were killed \textit{because} of their Chinese ethnicity (as was true of so many of the victims). \(^{41}\)

We can assume that very few, if any, of the authors who refer mistakenly to a massacre of Chinese Indonesians have any intention to deceive; many indeed would be distressed to discover their error. Why, then, does the myth persist? References to the alleged massacres are never footnoted, so it is not possible to trace a simple genealogy of error. News reports are sometimes described as the “first draft of history,” but newspaper articles of the time do not suggest any more than opportunistic attacks on Chinese of a kind that occurred repeatedly both before and after 1965, for example:

Chinese minorities always suffer in Southeast Asia when there is political convulsion. It doesn’t matter whether the shift goes left or right. In either case someone will always start looting Chinese shops and beating their proprietors. \(^{42}\)

Not even the \textit{Peking Review}, which shrilly attacked the new military regime in Indonesia, accusing it of both specific “outrages” (such as the killing of identifiable individuals) and the general “persecution” of Chinese, made any suggestion of large-scale massacres of Chinese. \(^{43}\) If there is indeed a genealogy to the misperception, its ancestor may be an editorial in the \textit{Far Eastern Economic Review} of April 1966 which stated:

\begin{quote}
Anti-Chinese feeling in Indonesia reached a bloody climax in Indonesia in recent months and there are reports of hundreds of thousands of deaths during the anti-leftist pogrom. \(^{44}\)
\end{quote}

The authority of a single erroneous source, however, is unlikely to explain the persistence of this kind of myth. The explanation, rather, is likely to lie in assumptions which well-meaning observers bring to the difficult task of understanding mass violence.

Mass violence is hard to observe systematically and hard to explain. Its complexity encourages observers to reduce it to explanatory paradigms which may become a dominant discourse, at least in the explanation of violence within a particular social setting. Brass has noted this tendency for India, Klier for Russia. \(^{45}\) These “paradigms” or “master narratives” are often “impervious to other facts, interpretations and explanations.” \(^{46}\)

In Indonesia, as we have seen, scholarly understanding of the Indonesian massacres of 1965–66 is not dominated by any single paradigm or master narrative. Scholars have offered a bewildering array of explanations for and characterizations of the violence, and most are willing to concede that it was multi-causal. Small wonder, then, that those who are not expert in Indonesian history sense the lack of an off-the-shelf explanation that can be pasted into a narrative using no more than a sentence or two. The absence of a paradigm or master narrative
has created space for the erroneous view that Chinese Indonesians were massacred in 1965. But why has the error taken this particular form?

If it were not for the fact that the myth of a genocide of Chinese Indonesians is found in the writings of the most eminent of scholars, one would be tempted to attribute it to shabby motives. Although *Time* magazine notoriously welcomed the defeat of the Indonesian Communist Party as “the West’s best news for years in Asia,” there may be unwillingness in the liberal democracies to acknowledge that the massacres might have been deliberately carried out by anti-communists who were politically motivated. It may be easier to pass off such massive violence in racial or primordial terms (centuries of enmity between indigenous Indonesians and ethnic Chinese) or to put it down to a supposedly inherent Indonesian/Malay propensity to run amuck (and to note that the origin of this English word is the Malay/Indonesian word *amok* or *amuk*).

An important part of the explanation is likely to be a mistaken assumption that the Indonesian Communist Party resembled the neighbouring Malayan Communist Party (MCP), founded in 1924 under the influence of the PKI. From the start, the MCP had been more active and influential amongst Chinese than its Indonesian counterpart. The Chinese community of British Malaya was a much larger proportion of the population than that of Indonesia, and it was more politically assertive. In particular, Chinese residents of the Malay Peninsula were the mainstay of the Malayan Communist Party for more than a decade after the end of the Second World War when the party engaged an armed revolution against British colonial rule during what was known as the Emergency. Although the revolution was largely over by 1960, the leftist movement remained strong amongst Chinese in Singapore. Given the opacity of Indonesian politics in this era, knowledge of the situation in a neighbouring territory, and the presence of the communist People’s Republic of China to the north, encouraged a perception that all Southeast Asian Chinese were inclined to support communism. When massacres took place in Indonesia, it was then perhaps easy to assume that Chinese would be numerous amongst the victims. To those familiar with conditions in Malaya, it must have seemed plausible that the Indonesian party would have resembled the Malayan one in its ethnic makeup, especially because in the years immediately before the events of 1965 the PKI had tended to align with the Chinese Communist Party rather than the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the global split in the communist movement.

Part of the explanation, however, is likely to lie in more sophisticated assumptions. Somewhat like the conviction that Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno, who had only one name, was really “Ahmad Sukarno,” myths survive because they are sustained by their environment, not because of their provenance. Historical myths, like the urban legends analysed by Brunvand, persist because they confirm and amplify judgments about the world that both the myth perpetrators and their audiences are comfortable in believing. The power of myths often means that they can be transferred with little effort from one context to another, seeming just as plausible in the new setting as they were in the old.
One case in point is the story of a sign bearing the words “Chinese and Dogs Not Admitted,” allegedly placed at the entrance to Huangpu Park in the International Settlement area of Shanghai. Although the regulations governing the park made clear (here in their 1914 form) that:

1. These Gardens are reserved exclusively for the foreign community
2. No dogs or bicycles are admitted

there is no evidence that a sign explicitly equating Chinese and dogs was ever erected. This lack of evidence, however, did not prevent the story from becoming a potent encapsulation of the many less graphically expressed humiliations which Chinese experienced in Shanghai during the age of Western domination in the city. Nor did it prevent the story from being transferred to folk memory of colonial Indonesia. Scholars conducting interviews about life in the Indies in Dutch times have been told with assurance of signs which announced that certain public facilities were “forbidden for dogs and natives” (verboden voor honden en inlanders). Introducing a collection of reminiscences by Indonesians about their experiences in colonial times, Beynon refers to “private swimming pools” where the sign was allegedly displayed, while the chapter of Abdul Haris Nasution in the same book, entitled “Honden en inlanders,” refers specifically to a high school in Bandung where the swimming pool was allegedly labelled in this way. No photographs of these signs, however, seem to exist and, more importantly, they are strikingly absent from contemporary critiques of Dutch colonialism. It is likely that the anecdote has been transplanted from Shanghai and has taken on life as an urban myth in Indonesia because it seems as consistent with the character of Dutch colonialism as it is with the character of international imperialism in China.

With this pattern in mind, there is evidence that the key element in the popular master narrative of anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia is a transplanted trope derived from the analysis of the violent consequences of European anti-Semitism. The central argument in this trope is that the cultural and religious difference of Jews (and Chinese) from majority populations, a sense of Jewish (and Chinese) cultural and intellectual superiority over those populations, and a conspicuous economic success disproportionate to their numbers have marked Jews (and Chinese) for unremitting resentment by local populations and for periodic slaughter. This trope leads analytically to the proposition that the discrimination against Chinese in Indonesia is sociologically similar to European discrimination against Jews and that this discrimination can escalate to genocide with relatively little warning. In other words, the sociological equation of Jews and Chinese primes observers to expect that Chinese in Indonesia will periodically undergo the same terrible purging that Jews have experienced in Europe.

Parallels between the Chinese in Southeast Asia and the Jews in Europe were already being drawn in the earliest period of colonial rule. For example, Crawfurd quotes from Sir Thomas Herbert’s description of the Chinese of Banten in 1621:
The Chyneses are no quarrellers, albeit voluptuous, venereous, costly in their sports, great gamesters, and in trading too subtle for young merchants; oft times so wedded to dicing, that, after they have lost their whole estate, wife and children are staked; yet in little time, Jew-like, by gleanings here and there, are able to redeem their loss; if not at the day, they are sold in the market for most advantage.55

Edmund Scott, who was a factor in Banten from 1603 to 1605, wrote on his return to England:

The Javans themselves are very dull and blockish to manage any affaires of a commonwealth; whereby all strangers goe beyond them that come into their land . . . especially the Chyneses, who, like Jews, live crooching under them, but rob them of their wealth and send it for Chyna. The Chyneses are very craftie people in trading, using all kind of cosoning and deceit which may possible be devised.56

A French visitor to Banten commented similarly:

These Chinese have built there handsome houses for their lodging, till such time as they shall have finished their trading and become rich; to attain which end, there is no vile or disgraceful job they will not put their hands to—they are like the Jews in their manner of trading.57

Scholarly analysis of the Chinese in Indonesia has also drawn both directly and implicitly on insights into the Chinese in Europe. This analysis has focused on the special interaction between cultural difference and entrepreneurship as an explanation for the apparent relative economic success of Chinese in Indonesia in comparison with indigenous Indonesians. In its broadest terms, the argument is that ethnic or ethno-religious minorities from abroad tend to prosper in commerce when states classify them as a distinct group and restrict their integration into the host society. They prosper partly because, excluded from political power, they channel their energies into those fields available for excellence (usually commerce, later also the professions). Even more, they prosper because embattled minority status creates internal networks of trust and support which are highly conducive to commercial success. This distinctive situation, in which a clearly identifiable, alien minority prospers more than the host community, provides the essential elements for pogroms and genocide: a deep resentment of the minority’s economic success combined with the willingness of indigenous elites to evade their own responsibilities by identifying scapegoats leads to periodic outbreaks of intense violence against those minorities.58

As Zenner has argued, it is entirely possible that these comparisons had a direct influence on indigenous Indonesian thinking about the local Chinese community and so contributed to the emergence of anti-Chinese violence in the archipelago.59 We know that in the early twentieth century explicit comparisons between Jews and Chinese were being made not far away from colonial Indonesia, in independent Siam, where in 1914 King Rama VI published pseudonymous anti-Chinese writings under the title “The Jews of the East.”60 For Indonesia, however, it is not until 1958 that we find an explicit comparison in an anti-Chinese tract: “The ghettos to which the Jews restricted their daily lives could be compared to the special living quarters which the Chinese built for themselves

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in many towns.” The genocide myth, however, is located outside Indonesia—amongst Westerners and Chinese—rather than within Indonesian society. After the Holocaust, moreover, the meaning of the term “Jews of Asia” shifted at least partly from denoting a successful entrepreneurial minority to denoting a persecuted minority. When the South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem decreed far-reaching assimilation measures against the country’s large Chinese community, the foreign minister of the Republic of China (Taiwan), George Yeh, was reported to have said that he worried that Diem’s actions would encourage further discrimination. “We Chinese,” he said, “are being looked on as the Jews of Asia.” The American journalist Seymour Topping conjured up the same shift of meaning in 1966 when he wrote:

The overseas Chinese, who sometimes despairingly describe themselves as “the Jews of Asia” are once more victims of political turbulence and economic discrimination in Southeast Asia.

The analytical equation between anti-Semitism in Europe and anti-Sinicism in Indonesia, however, remained intact in this shift of meaning, and it appears to be the most plausible explanation for the persistence of the myth of a genocide of Chinese Indonesians in 1965–66.

The tension between morality and analysis

As we have seen, the early years of Suharto’s New Order were marked by widespread violence against Chinese Indonesians, much of it encouraged or at least condoned by the state. The subsequent history of New Order Indonesia was also punctuated by a series of violent attacks on Chinese. Riots broke out in Bandung in 1973 and in Solo and Semarang in 1980. Chinese businesses in Jakarta were bombed in 1984, and further riots broke out in the small Javanese towns of Situbondo, Tasikmalaya and Rengasdengklok in 1996–97. The most serious violence of all accompanied the fall of Suharto in May 1998. Over the course of a few days from May 12 to 15, houses, shops and vehicles in Jakarta, Solo, Surabaya, Lampung and Palembang were burnt, individuals were beaten and sometimes killed and many women were raped. In much of this violence, Chinese were especially targeted.

Alongside the physical violence after 1965, Chinese Indonesians experienced a tightening noose of discriminatory regulations and practices. Chinese schools and newspapers were closed, the public celebration of Chinese festivals was prohibited, the display of Chinese characters and the importation of printed material in Chinese was banned, Chinese access to education was restricted, informal discrimination kept Chinese out of government positions, Chinese were placed under varying degrees of pressure to adopt “Indonesian” names. At the same time, the New Order maintained and expanded a vast apparatus of extortion from Chinese business, under which Chinese entrepreneurs paid both official and unofficial security forces for protection from the threat of mob violence. The persistent myth of a genocide of Chinese Indonesians in 1965–66 thus does not exist in
a moral vacuum but rather in the context of an enduring, acute threat to the lives, property and general well-being of Chinese Indonesians. This context has been given still greater relevance in recent years by the research of Stanton, who has identified what he calls Eight Stages of Genocide. The heart of his argument is that relatively trivial actions such as the classification of humans into distinct categories and the attachment of symbols to those categories are not to be taken as mere manifestations of prejudice but rather as steps on the road to genocide. The solution to genocide, he argues, is to identify such early warnings and to intervene on that basis to prevent the occurrence of genocide in advance.

This context creates a serious moral dilemma for historians. Our duty to analytical honesty goes beyond simple fidelity to the factual accuracy of details. Just as we recognize that we impart meaning to facts by placing them in context in our own texts, we have to recognize that our writings create meaning, independent of the issue of technical accuracy, in the social context in which we publish them. If there is a single, powerful reason for refraining from challenging the myth of the genocide of Chinese Indonesians in 1965–66, it is that challenging this myth would diminish the sense that the treatment of Chinese Indonesians is a major human rights issue which warrants attention. A similar dilemma faces historians of Aboriginal Australia: scholarly debates over the antiquity of the Aboriginal presence in Australia, over the role of Aborigines in the extinction of the Australian megafauna and over the character and extent of reported massacres of Aborigines by white settlers have been lifted out of their scholarly context and imbued with political meaning.

Yet, if we concede the moral force of this argument, other moral issues lie waiting for us. One is the fact that the immediate lesson for Chinese Indonesians which arises from the massacre myth is that they remain in chronic danger of extermination and that the only safe remedy is to seek a new life abroad. Many Chinese Indonesians who had the necessary connections or funds did precisely this after the violence of 1998, and we are personally aware of cases in which academic specialists on Chinese Indonesian affairs were asked to supply supporting expert evidence to lawyers acting for Chinese Indonesians claiming political asylum in Australia or North America on the basis that they were persecuted in Indonesia. Such claims rested partly on claiming a Holocaust-like history of massacre in Indonesia which in fact does not exist. To connive in this outcome by perpetuating the myth of an earlier genocide is to vote against the possibility of a truly multi-cultural society in Indonesia.

Another issue is blood libel. To accuse indigenous Indonesians of a racism so intense that they would commit genocide against their fellow citizens of Chinese descent is not a trivial matter. Given that the emerging global moral order imposes upon the descendants of perpetrators a complex moral obligation to the descendants of victims (expressed amongst other things in calls for apology and compensation), we have an obligation to exercise care in where we lay both guilt and victimhood.

There are serious analytical issues, as well. For one thing, the equation of Chinese and Jews as pariah-entrepreneurial minorities erases the special
element of religious antagonism that exists in the history of Christian–Jewish relations. Although Muslims in Indonesia have taken exception to Chinese cultural practices such as pork-eating and gambling, there is nothing in the historical relationship between Chinese and Indonesians that approaches the visceral hatred that arose from Christianity’s traditional designation of Jews as Christ-killers. In sociological terms, the relationship of Chinese settlers in Indonesia to their host societies is more akin to that of the German settlers in Eastern Europe. Both communities had ancient roots in the region of destination, and both represented an advanced neighbouring civilization while having relatively little to do with the political ambitions of rulers in that civilization. Both developed special relations with local rulers and acculturated in significant ways (not the least language) to their host communities while commonly retaining distinctive names and a different religion from the hosts. And both experienced discrimination and expulsion at the hands of newly independent nations defined by indigenous identity.68

More generally, to believe that the most intense violence in Indonesian history was generated by racism, moreover, when racism was not the motive, risks blinding us analytically to the real causes of intense violence in Indonesian and other societies. There is growing evidence that one of the most significant elements in outbreaks of violence in Indonesia is the availability of impunity to perpetrators. That is to say, violence may not be motivated by intense hatreds, antagonisms or tensions but rather by the absence or withdrawal of the normal state sanctions against violence. If this is the case, then the causes of violence against Chinese Indonesians need not be sought in general racism at all, but rather in the reasons for state weakness and withdrawal and in the thorny problem of generalized violence in Indonesian society.69 The solution to such violence will not therefore lie in addressing prejudice or discrimination against Chinese Indonesians, even if doing so would be desirable from a general human rights point of view.

Still more acute is the problem of genocide denial. Massacres took place on a vast scale in 1965–66. To portray the victims as other than they were—which was Indonesians of the Left—is a particularly troubling appropriation of human tragedy by a group that did not experience it. The appropriation is all the more distasteful because the surviving members of the Indonesian Left experienced discrimination under the New Order that was at least comparable to that suffered by Chinese Indonesians. At least one million people were detained for some or all of the decade following 1965, and those released carried identity cards marked with the letters ET (eks-tahanan, former detainee) which became the basis for systematic discrimination in education and employment, as well as general harassment by the authorities, even more comprehensive than that suffered by Chinese Indonesians. In the 1980s, moreover, the New Order government introduced the principle of bersih lingkungan (“environmental cleanliness”), under which the discriminatory measures against former detainees were extended to their family members, even those born long after 1965. Both Chinese Indonesians and families from the Left have experienced a substantial relaxation of
official discrimination since the fall of Suharto, but the social stigma attached to the Left remains at least as burdensome as the stigma of being Chinese. 70

Genocide denial

In its classic form, genocide denial involves denying the facts of past atrocities in order to exonerate perpetrators and to diminish the moral standing of the victims that arises from their past suffering. Deniers of the Holocaust characteristically take this approach. 71 More recently, the accusation of genocide denial has been levelled at those who would retain a narrow definition of genocide, perhaps even limiting it to the Holocaust. In these accusations, the debate over facts (How many died? What proportion? And in what circumstances?) is located in a more fundamental debate over meaning: do the events, as known, warrant categorization as genocide, or should some lesser or different term be used? This debate, in which serious scholarly reservations about the precision of definitions jostle with moral desires for particular conclusions, has been most relevant to the systematic killings of Armenians during and after the First World War and to the extermination of indigenous peoples around the world as part of the colonial and imperial projects of great powers. 72

The fictitious massacre of Chinese Indonesians in 1965–66 is a different form of denial. Indeed, there is no obvious parallel to this reattribution of a genocide 73 from its real victims to a different group. Nonetheless, the misattribution raises two issues of broader importance for genocide studies. First is the danger of dominant paradigms. Thanks to the extensive research conducted on European anti-Semitism and on the Holocaust, we have a powerful set of arguments (not all of them consistent) explaining the Holocaust. Under such circumstances, it is easy to imagine that the hard analytical work has been done and that those arguments can be applied with relatively little modification to other parts of the world. The misunderstanding of Indonesia’s 1965–66 massacres shows that this is not the case. Despite its analytical power in the European context, the pariah-entrepreneur model has led observers to expect events in Indonesia which simply did not happen.

Second, the prevalence of the myth and its spread into the belief systems of overseas Chinese distorts the debate over just what people of Chinese descent should expect from and offer to the societies they inhabit outside China. This distortion resembles what Shohat and Stam have identified in United States history as an enduring pattern of recruiting past massacres and atrocities to justify plans for extreme action in the future; they call it the “Make My Day” syndrome. 74 The image of a past genocide, conjured from imperfect memories of an entirely different event, becomes grounds for setting aside the need to discuss the realities of the present. That, surely, is reason enough to discard the myth.

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Notes and References


14 Coppel, op cit. p 58.

15 In 1967, Indonesian military units killed probably thousands of Chinese Indonesians in the province of West Kalimantan as part of the suppression of ethnic Chinese guerrilla units formed to operate in neighbouring Sarawak as part of Indonesia’s confrontation of Malaysia. In carrying out these killings, the Indonesian military recruited indigenous Dayaks using psychological warfare techniques to inflame ethnic tensions. In both absolute numbers of victims and in terms of the proportion of the local Chinese population who perished, these killings were by far the most serious attack on Chinese Indonesians since the revolutionary era violence of the 1940s, but they are not generally considered to be part of the 1965–66 massacres.


28 Chin, op cit. p 33, endnote 10.


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33 Personal communications.
46 Brass, op cit. p 3.
54 H.C. Beynon, Verboden voor Honden en Inlanders: Indonesiërs vertellen over hun Leven in de koloniale Tijd [Forbidden for dogs and natives: Indonesians tell about their life in colonial times] (Amsterdam: Mets, 1995).
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65 Coppe, op cit.; Purdey, op cit.
73 We do not wish to address in detail here the issue of whether what actually took place in Indonesia should be categorized as “genocide.” If a massacre of half a million, out of an estimated Chinese Indonesian population of three million, had taken place, there would be a good case for regarding it as genocide, at least by those who are willing to accept a broad definition of the concept. Whether the massacre of half a million Indonesian communists (whose estimated total number at the time, coincidentally, is also generally estimated at three million) constitutes genocide is still an issue. Many researchers follow Lemkin in excluding political killings from the category of genocide, but changes in the scholarly understanding of identity during the half century since Lemkin was writing have made this exclusion problematic. We appreciate now that ethnic identity is far more constructed and far less primordial than it was understood in Lemkin’s time, and therefore that it is closer in character to political identity than Lemkin realized. Shamsul, moreover, by conceptualizing different conceptions of national identity within the framework of a single state as “nations-of-intent,” has further blurred the distinction between political, national and ethnic identity. In the Indonesian case, Cribb argues that the communist vision for Indonesia constituted a separate conception of the nation and that the extermination of party members on a massive scale thus constituted genocide. See A.B. Shamsul, “Nations-of-intent in Malaysia,” in: Stein Tønnesson and Hans Antlöv, eds., Asian Forms of the Nation (Richmond: Curzon, 1996), pp 323–347; and Robert Cribb, “Genocide in the non-Western world: implications for Holocaust studies,” in: Steven L.B. Jensen, ed., Genocide: Cases, Comparisons and Contemporary Debates (Copenhagen: Danish Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, 2003), pp 123–140.
Eastwood as Dirty Harry uses those words to challenge a man to kill his female hostage, thereby giving Harry a legitimate pretext to kill the man. See also Michael Rogin, “‘Make my day!’: spectacle as amnesia in imperial politics,” *Representations* Vol 29, 1990, p 103.

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