

How Indonesian am I?

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How Indonesian am I? Let me put it this way. The other night, when a rainstorm woke me up in the middle of the night, my first thoughts were "Wonderful! Maybe it will help put out the fires in town." In what town? The fires were in Jakarta; I've been living in Hong Kong since last year. So, yes, I'm Indonesian, all right. But I'm also ethnically Chinese. Some people think I can't be both. Not completely, anyway.

I feel as Indonesian as any indigenous pribumi. I was born in Jakarta. So were my three sisters and one brother. And my mom and dad too. We speak Indonesian at home. My roots and my future are there. I'm passionate about the country - from the culture to the beauty of the countryside to the mysteries of its political life. For me, China is an exotic faraway place, somewhere I would love to visit. But that's all. My parents went there once and I got the impression that for them it was a bit like, say, an Australian going to Europe to see where his ancestors had come from.

Since the rioting started, I have been in touch with my family regularly. They are frightened, of course, but they are fine. They say there has been no trouble in the mainly pribumi area where they live. But, elsewhere in town, an aunt's house was attacked with rocks and a store house owned by a friend was burned to the ground. "It's finished, totally finished," my sister said on the phone. She was too distressed for me to establish whether she was talking about our friend's business or the country.

But now a confession. For all my "Indonesian-ness," I was brought up almost in a different world from the pribumi. Chinese schools are banned in Indonesia (as are the public display of Chinese characters and the celebrating of the lunar New Year, among other things), so most Chinese go to private Christian schools. At the one I attended, the only other children were Chinese. There were pribumi living on my street, but I can't honestly say I knew much about them. A brief "hello" here; a "how are you?" there. Anyway, like most Chinese parents, my mom and dad crammed my after-school hours with so many classes (English, music and others) that I didn't have a lot of time for socializing with anybody.

It wasn't until I returned from studying in the U.S. and took a job in

journalism that I got to know any pribumi. Now I count a number of them among my closest friends. But I am an exception. For most Chinese, the only pribumi they ever get to know is their household maid, their pembantu. Once they reach adulthood, there is almost no further social contact. Even in professional life, the two groups rarely mingle.

Is it any wonder, then, there is suspicion and prejudice - on both sides? I have never had any racist remarks directed at me personally, but I know the Chinese are accused of being concerned only with their own welfare and with making money. As for Chinese attitudes about the pribumi, I remember, when I was a youngster, asking my father why they were referred to as fangui (literally "rice devils," but meaning inferior). "We eat rice too," I said. "So we're also fangui, right?" My father just smiled. It was too difficult - and probably too embarrassing - to explain.

And so it goes on. If I am seen on the street with a Chinese male, no one pays any attention. If I am with a Westerner, people may look but no more. But if I'm in the company of a pribumi, we draw stares - hostile looks that suggest there is something distasteful about our relationship. Those glares hurt, of course, but they are also saddening. Do they mean there is no place for a Chinese in Indonesia - even one who wakes up worrying about her town burning down?

This essay was published in Asiaweek (www.asiaweek.com) on 29 May 1998, shortly after the anti-Chinese riots on May 13-14 that year in Jakarta. It generated so much response from the magazine's readers and also online chatrooms, and it might spur a debate on inter-racial issues and racism, once taboo topics in Indonesia.