

Twice Refugees

Hong Kong is home to many who fled anti-Chinese violence in a land now slowly becoming more tolerant.

By **Yenni Kwok**

Two years after race riots in Indonesia left Chinese shops looted and burned, and horrific memories of rape and murder, Indonesia's Chinese community are at last beginning to sense a ray of hope since the appointment of Abdurrahman Wahid as the country's fourth president. It is an optimism shared by Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong.

Though most of the estimated 250,000 Indonesian Chinese now living in Hong Kong left Indonesia more than 30 years ago, they still have families and a cultural attachment to the country where they were born and raised.

"Gus Dur [President Wahid] is very good," said Hau Kwok-heung, 43, founder and managing director of the Modern Godown in Kwai Chung. He praised Mr Wahid's opening of a conference last month of about 300 Hakka business people from around the Asian region. The Jakarta conference was held to celebrate a shared culture and discuss how Indonesian Hakka can bring home money they had sent abroad during the attacks on their community.

But, like others, he does not trust everything in the country. One example is corruption - many ethnic Chinese say they are routinely asked for money when they visit the country. "When I went to Indonesia, they bluntly said 'coffee money, sir'," Mr Hau said.

Wong Lan-ying, 53, has been in Hong Kong since 1972 and works in a small stock-trading company. She recalls a visit to her family in Indonesia last year with some anxiety. "I was scared of the Indonesian pribumis," she said, referring to the native Indonesians associated with the attacks that began two years ago this weekend.

Yet even ethnic Chinese, who have been away for many years and are unlikely to return, feel Indonesia is their home. Most Chinese regard their first village as their ancestral hamlet somewhere in China, and as Yang Ping, secretary-general of the Hong Kong Society for Indonesian Studies, puts it: "We still consider Indonesia our second village."

Most Indonesian Chinese in Hong Kong comprise the generation who fled the country between the end of World War II and the early 1960s. The first exodus was sparked not by conflict but by the promise of a better life. An estimated 48,000 Indonesian Chinese, lacking Chinese-language universities at home, were encouraged by their teachers and communist propaganda to go to Mao Zedong's "motherland" to pursue tertiary education. Having left, often against their parents' will, most found they could not return.

"It was a one-way ticket," said Charles Coppel, a history professor at the University

of Melbourne. "The Indonesian Government would not allow them to go back."

Most people left in the political and social turmoil of the 1960s. In 1959, then-president Sukarno felt that too much business was in the hands of Chinese and banned them from trading in rural areas. Sporadic race riots broke out with the loss of Chinese lives. At least 130,000 people deserted Indonesia for China between 1960 and 1961, either in commercial ships or vessels sent by Beijing to rescue them.

Five years later, an alleged coup attempt by the Indonesian Communist Party and the death of six army generals led to a witch-hunt against communists and Chinese, resulting in about 5,000 Chinese fleeing to the mainland.

Tso Chu-lam was only 17 when she left her hometown in Sulawesi in 1960 for China, together with her Chinese father, Indonesian mother and eight siblings. The family ended up on a government-owned farm in Fujian for overseas Chinese. For frugal pay they did back-breaking rice-farming jobs with 3,000 other Indonesian Chinese.

"The first year we were in China, my Indonesian mother cried every day," says Ms Tso, now 57. "I didn't like it either. In China, we were called huana [a derogatory term for Indonesians]; in Indonesia, we were called and reminded to be cina [Chinese]."

Many suffered during the Cultural Revolution because of their foreign connections and middle-class backgrounds. The state also prohibited Indonesian-Chinese and their China-born children from joining the Communist Party, enrolling in the army or taking important government positions. It was said that the highest position available was that of a school teacher.

Ms Wong remembers clearly her father coming to join her in Guangzhou in 1966 after he left Indonesia during the anti-communist witch-hunts. In Guangzhou, however, he was accused of being a capitalist.

A lot of talent was wasted. In 1966 Kuok Wai-mun, then 23, could not continue his medical studies in Indonesia because of his Chinese citizenship. Mr Kuok packed his books, aiming to continue his studies in China. "But they were all useless," says Mr Kuok, now 57. Considered too old to enter one of the schools that overseas Chinese were required to attend before university, he was sent to an overseas Chinese farm in Fujian. He was so angry with his mother for having pressured him to be a Chinese citizen that he did not write to her for several years.

Leaving was impossible during the Cultural Revolution. Only in the early 1970s did the word go out that overseas Chinese were free to leave. There was an exodus of about three-quarters of the overseas Chinese, who numbered more than 400,000 people, most of them Indonesian.

While about 250,000 settled in Hong Kong, about a tenth of that number - including Mr Kuok - chose Macau. Others have continued to leave the mainland for Hong Kong ever since. On their arrival, the Indonesian-Chinese usually took jobs in factories or construction. "We struggled to fit into the mainstream Hong Kong society," says Mr Yang of the Indonesian study group. "After all, we were not from here, and we tried very hard to learn Cantonese."

Now many own their own businesses and call the SAR home. Most have given up hope of ever living in Indonesia again, but many still visit relatives.

"I still have a cousin in Sulawesi," says Ms Tso, who left the mainland only four years ago and has been unable to afford to visit Indonesia. "If I can't go back for good, I will be happy enough visiting her for a few days."

"We will always love Indonesia," Mr Yang says. "After all, we were born there."

Musician's costly lapse of timing

Unlike most Indonesian-Chinese, Thio Keng-bouw never intended to emigrate. But an accident of timing left him stuck in the People's Republic for 12 tumultuous years during the Cultural Revolution.

Mr Thio, now 61, was a music student in Indonesia during the 1960s. He was also a member of Baperki Youth, a group of young Chinese linked to the Indonesian Communist Party. On September 27, 1965, he went to China to attend a three-week youth congress. Three days after they arrived in Beijing, six army generals were killed in what became known as the September 30 Movement. Indonesian army chief Suharto blamed the Indonesian Communist Party and accused China of being involved.

Mr Thio, then 27, knew nothing would be the same. "On October 6, I listened to the broadcast of the Indonesian state radio," he said. "I knew if I went back, I would be arrested." Mr Thio, who was an Indonesian citizen, asked for political asylum in Beijing. It was granted. The authorities even gave him a free room and monthly stipend and allowed him to study at the Beijing Conservatory of Music. Then, the Cultural Revolution started.

"I was told I could not go to classes anymore, so I only stayed in my own room, practised piano and played classical music," said Mr Thio. Amazingly, he was not harmed.

In 1978, he emigrated to Hong Kong, presuming it would be easier to then return to Indonesia. But his family told him he was still on the Indonesian government's blacklist. He later married an Indonesian-Chinese woman and began teaching piano at home. He no longer wishes to return, but Indonesia's softened attitude to exiles has persuaded him to visit his homeland this year for the first time in 35 years.

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