

# Stories of Childhood and Adolescence: An Ethnographic Study of Indonesian-Chinese People

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## Abstract

James P. Spradley (2006) argues that a language is a tool for constructing reality. The term of non-indigenous for Indonesian-Chinese people continuously exists, even though they are legally Indonesian. It cannot be denied that friction between Indonesian-Chinese and Indonesian non-Chinese still occurs, even though the integration is getting better. For this reason, researchers want to broaden the view of Chinese people's life from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In this study, the researchers used ethnographic methods to explore and telescope the story of growing up. According to James P. Spradley (2006: 5), ethnographic research aims to find the meanings of actions from events that happen to people we want to understand. A number of meanings are conveyed through language. This is a continuation of the previous study which have presented the results of interviews with three informants. This study will discuss the results of interviews with three other informants. Three informants were interviewed, namely three women named Mei (44 years old), Henny (43 years old) and Devi (22 years old) live in a fairly close location in the province of Banten. Mei and Devi, who are from the lower middle class, do not feel the difference between themselves and other children in Indonesia, even though they are both Indonesian-Chinese. Mei is more focused on issues of social and economic status that distinguish her from other children, while Devi is more focused on the departure of her father from the family. On the other hand, Henny as a child experienced restrictions on socializing from her parents with non-Chinese friends due to fears of being bullied. However, as she grew older, she became freer to choose her associates with non-Chinese friends, and she had quite a pleasant experience.

Keywords: Ethnography, Indonesian-Chinese, Adolescence, Childhood

## Introduction

A language is a tool used to reach reality. An ethnography expert, James P. Spradley stated that years ago. He said that different language creates and expresses different reality. This as well is done by a certain tribe in defining and giving meaning to their life.

Anies Baswedan recently came up with the term *pribumi* or in English

"indigenous" as part of his campaign in the Jakarta governor election. This became a polemic in society. The use of the term more or less had a string attached to his opponent, Basuki Tjahaya Purnama famously addressed as Ahok.

The mention of indigenous to Indonesian-Chinese people continues to occur, even though they have legally become Indonesian citizens. According to the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, the term *pribumi* means native inhabitants; originally comes from the place concerned; inlander. Meanwhile, according to Nasihin Masha, the word *pribumi* is a shift from the word "bumiputera" which has the same meaning. The founding fathers created the word bumiputera to replace the word "inlander" which means degrading or pejorative (*Republika*, 2017).

A different opinion was conveyed by the historical researcher of the Hindia Belanda, Andi Achdian. Andi, who was quoted from *tirto.id*, stated that since the existence of European colonialism, the term *pribumi* refers to people who lived in their colony. They called it as "indigenous", which is then translated in Malayu Pasar as *pribumi*. Andi also explained that the Colonial Law of 1854 was also the origin of the emergence of the term *pribumi*. This law classified the population in the Hindia Belanda into three groups, namely *Europeanen* or European white people, *Vreemde Oosterlingen* (Foreign East) which includes Chinese, Arab, Indian and other non-European (mixed-descendant) people, and Indigenous or *pribumi*, who were then identified with the local community (the Malay race), especially those who are Muslims. (*Tirto.id*, 2017).

Meanwhile, Leo Suryadinata (2003: 2-3) further revealed that the label of non-native was attached to the ethnic Chinese community. He explained that this was the impact of the assimilation policy implemented by Soeharto in 1966. Soeharto limited the space for ethnic Chinese in various fields and only gave space in the economic sector. This inadvertently increased the strength of this ethnic group in the economic sector, as well as created a gap with other groups of Indonesian society, most of whom have low economic rates.

Indonesian perception toward Indonesian-Chinese wasn't built in a day, but the relationship went through a really long historical journey. This was started in the Dutch colonialism era. As stated by Prof. Dr. A. Dahana, the Netherlands applied a politic of segregation. Chinese people were classified into the Foreign East which distinguished them from the natives. In addition, Chinese citizens were required to live in designated-certain places (Dahana, 2010).

Prof. Dr. A. Dahana also added that the root of this disharmony is the lack of contact between the Chinese community and the indigenous community (note: the terms *pribumi* and non-*pribumi* have recently been rejected). Dahana said the lack of contact between the two groups has risen the stereotyping. "The Chinese people are equated as economic animals, ..., they do not have a feeling of nationalism, are always loyal to their ancestral country, a-social, exclusive. On the other hand, the Chinese consider the natives as lazy, extortionists and other negative nicknames. " (Dahana, 2010, xiii).

A similar opinion was also conveyed by Leo Suryadinata (2003: 2-3), who stated

that in 1966, Soeharto implemented a policy of assimilation which actually divided, not united Indonesian-Chinese people with other Indonesian communities. In 1966, Suharto also put pressure on ethnic Chinese people to change their names to Indonesian names.

In his research on Chinese ethnic identity in the mass media, Ariel Heryanto (Heryanto, 2015: 205) stated that "After being systematically rejected as not part of the national identity for decades, and occasionally being told to return home (to the land of China), the community Indonesian-Chinese were found guilty of several charges by the New Order regime. " Heryanto added that Indonesian-Chinese people are considered a dangerous race because they are related to their ancestors in China who adhered to communist ideology.

The history of discrimination against Indonesian-Chinese seems to have started since the Dutch colonial era. This happened because of the policy of the Dutch colonial government which, according to professor A Dahana, divided the residents of the colony into three groups, namely: the European group, the Foreign Eastern group (the Indonesian-Chinese group), and the indigenous group. In addition, A Dahana added that, Indonesian-Chinese people were also required to live in designated-certain places. This has led to the presence of an area known as Chinatown in various major cities in Indonesia. (A Dahana, 2013: xi).

According to A Dahana, this negative sentiment towards ethnicity was further exacerbated when the Dutch colonial government employed Chinese people to become tax collectors. Another factor that drives it is that Chinese descendants are known to have a sense of pride and respect for their ancestral culture. This creates a distance from the local population. (A Dahana, 2013: xiii).

Another factor was conveyed by Ong Hok Ham (2018: 148) through the tension that occurred between the majority of Indonesian people who were agrarian against traders who were considered explorative, even considered as demons. The Chinese minority is synonymous with the world of commerce. Meanwhile, Munawir Aziz, Deputy Secretary of the LTN Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama in his article published in Kompas stated that hatred against Chinese groups had occurred from the VOC era to the New Order. In addition, Aziz added, in 1965, Chinese people were associated with communism and were considered as supporters of the PKI. (*Kompas*, 2018).

Meanwhile, Leo Suryadinata (2003: 1-12) in his research entitled Indonesian "State Policy towards Chinese Ethnicity: From Assimilation to Multiculturalism?" concluded that state policies so far shaped Chinese identity and culture, but did not mix Chinese people into "Indigenous Indonesians" as a group. After the fall of Soeharto, ethnic Chinese had more freedom to maintain their ethnic identity. State policy towards ethnic Chinese has changed, but the majority of Indonesian people have not changed. There is still the concept of the indigenous people who are opposed to the ethnic Chinese. In addition, policies that do not consider race have made certain advances, but are not yet widely accepted.

Charles A. Coppel from the University of Melbourne in his research entitled "Historical Obstacles in the Acceptance of Chinese Ethnicity in Multicultural Indonesia"

states that ethnic Chinese are still considered as foreign descent rather than an ethnic group in Indonesia even though they have lived for centuries in Indonesia. After the fall of Soeharto in May 1998, Coppel stated that almost all restrictions on expressing Chinese people and culture had been lifted. However, apart from that, prejudice against the Chinese ethnicity still thrives in Indonesian society. (Coppel, 2003: 13-22).

We cannot deny that we can still find friction between Indonesian-Chinese and non-Chinese in the present situation even though the assimilation and diversity values come into a better shape. The reformation changes have given the Chinese people the to work in various fields, such as doctors, journalists, lecturers, etc. But the negative stigma keeps hanging in the air.

This is the reason why the present used the ethnography method to dig and see the story of growing up. According to James P. Spradley, "The essence of ethnography is an effort to pay attention to the meanings of actions from the incident befalling the person we want to understand. Some of these meanings are expressed directly in the language." (Spradley, 2006: 5).

Amri Marzali stated that "ethnography is a report about an ethnic group written by an anthropologist on the results of field st for months or years." (Marzali, 2006: vii). Meanwhile, Sutopo & Nurhadi stated that ethnography is an attempt to "actually technically ethnography is how to reach a depth of understanding of the complexity of human life". (Sutopo & Nurhadi, 2018: 142). Spradley (2006) states "Language plays such a big role in human experience. In ethnography, language structures our field notes and feeds into every analysis and insight. Language permeates our meeting with informants. " (p. 25).

## **Method**

Kholifah and Suyadnya stated that qualitative research has three main keys, namely "taking facts based on the understanding of the subject, the results of detailed and in-depth observations (thick description) and trying to find new theoretical results that are far from existing theories" (Kholifah & Suyadnya, 2018: 14). Through the definition above, it can be explained that the method used in this research was ethnography. Spradley said that in ethnography, researchers work together with informants to produce a description of culture. Spradley stated that in this case, the definition of an informant is "native speaker" or "source of information" (Spradley, 2006: 39). Informants are different from respondents. Spradley stated that the important difference between respondents and informants is that respondents answer questions in the language of the social scientist, while informants use their own language. An ethnographer generally uses engaged research methods to listen to and witness society in a reasonable setting. (Spradley, 2006: 46-48). Data collection techniques in this research began, by selecting informants. Spradley stated that there are five minimum requirements to choose good informants, namely: 1) full enculturation, 2) direct involvement, 3) unfamiliar cultural atmosphere, 4) sufficient time and 5) non-analytical. (Spradley, 2006: 68-77). Spradley suggests that what is

meant by full enculturation here is that the informant must be well acquainted with the culture. Spradley also suggested that researchers have a relatively unknown cultural setting.

In this case, the head researcher comes from the Balinese tribe, thus, she will be able to distance herself from the cultural atmosphere she is researching. Meanwhile, the research members, who are Indonesian-Chinese, are considered to be able to enrich this research through their personal narratives and experiences from childhood to adulthood as part of the process of growing up in Indonesia. In this research's first stage, we interviewed three informants. The first informant was Devi Yuliana Sutedjo, a 25-year-old Jakarta-born Chinese Indonesian woman who currently lives in Serpong. The second informant was Eddy Gunawan, a 58-year-old Chinese man who has lived in Bubulak Village, Bogor since he was a child. And the third informant was Sunlie Thomas Alexander, a 43-year-old Bangka-born Indonesian-Chinese who currently lives in Yogyakarta. The three informants were selected to represent the depiction of Indonesian-Chinese people who came from three different generations and lived in three different locations. In the second stage, we interviewed three new informants in 2022. This research will present the result of the second stage of our research.

The next stage of ethnographic research was to collect research notes. Spradley explained, "An ethnographic record includes field notes, recording devices, pictures, artifacts and other objects that document the cultural atmosphere being studied" (Spradley, 2006: 96). We conducted this research through face-to-face and Google-meet interviews. The decision to select more than one informant was driven by the short duration of the research, which was approximately six months. Through the selection of these three informants, the researcher tried to obtain a diversity of identities to enrich the previous result. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Spradley (2006: 105) classified research notes based on this transcription as an extended report. By combining the transcription and the handwritten story, we described their point of view in growing up in Indonesia as Indonesian-Chinese.

In general, this section describes how the study was conducted. The subject matter of this section are: (1) the study design; (2) the sample population or subject of the research; (3) data collection techniques and instrument development; (4) and data analysis techniques. Please use descriptive paragraphs.

You can use these questions as a guideline to write the method: 1) Is the design suitable for answering the question posed? 2) Is there sufficient information present for you to replicate the research? 3) Does the article identify the procedures followed? 4) Are these ordered in a meaningful way? 5) If the methods are new, are they explained in detail? 6) Was the sampling appropriate? 7) Have the equipment and materials been adequately described? 8) Does it clear what type of data was recorded? 9) Have you been precise in describing measurements?

It is important to note that you do not need to use too many formulas or tables unless it is absolutely necessary to be displayed.

## Discussion

This research is ethnographic research to find out various stories experienced by ethnic Chinese while growing up in Indonesia. As is well known, "ethnography is a report about an ethnic group written by an anthropologist on the results of field research over months or years." (Marzali, 2006: vii). As Spradley puts it, ethnographic interviews are "a series of friendly conversations in which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to help the informant provide answers as an informant." (Spradley, 2006: 85), so we also conducted a series of friendly conversations with the three informants we had selected, namely living in a number of different locations, and coming from different age groups to get a variety of experiences growing up in Indonesia. The informants, as Spradley stated should be: 1) native speakers, 2) fully uncultured which means that they must understand the culture well and ever lived in the culture for at least a year.

This research is a continuation of our previous research entitled *The Story of Growing Up in Indonesia Ethnographic research of Indonesian-Chinese people* published in the *Metahumaniora* journal. Based on previous research on three different informants, Ariani & Atmaja (2021) concluded that the three informants who live in three different areas and come from three different generations still experience bullying and negative stigma from their social environment. In this case, the position of the majority and minority gives a role in bullying. Bullying occurs when the informant is in a minority position, with the exception of the informant named Devi Sutedjo, who does not experience bullying, even though she is in a minority position at SMP 1 Serpong. She was treated nicely by her friends.

We interviewed three new informants to enrich the results of our previous research, namely Sri Meiny Ransha Wirya Atmaja, a woman born in Semarang on May 31, 1978. Mei, the informant's nickname, was referred to as informant 1. Meanwhile, Henny Seniwati was born in Ciputat, on December 15, 1979, and currently living in the Gunung Sindur area, Bogor, hereinafter referred to as informant 2. Devi Paramita, the youngest of three, was then considered informant 3. Devi, who was born in Tangerang on December 2, 2000, is currently living at the same address as her childhood home.

### Childhood for Mei, Henny, and Devi

Mei (44 years old) described her childhood as very happy. She, who had moved schools from Central Java, Jakarta, and Gunung Sindur, Bogor, during her elementary school years, felt that her childhood was no different from other children. Mei emphasized her limited economic situation, distinguishing her childhood from those of more economically well-off children. A similar story was told by Devi (22 years old), who was much younger. Her childhood was spent in the Cikokol area, Tangerang. She said she got along well with the neighborhood kids in her housing complex. Devi emphasized that the difference in her relationship is more due to her background as a broken home family, namely growing up without the presence of a father, not based on her ethnic background. Henny (43 years old) was the one who experienced social

restriction based on her ethnic background. Henny, who grew up in the Kedaung area, Ciputat, South Tangerang, shared that she was restricted from playing with the neighbor's children for fear of being hurt, ostracized, and made fun of.

From the explanation above, it can be seen that age does not significantly influence the lives of Indonesian-Chinese informants. Mei and Devi, who are about twenty years apart, did not feel any ethnic discrimination in their childhood. Both of them mingle freely with their neighbors around the house. Mei focused more on her economic issues, while Devi was more consent more on her broken home issue. Meanwhile, the second informant, Henny, whose age is not much different from Mei, and who lives in a fairly close area, actually felt the difference in her childhood, when she was restricted from socializing with neighbors who had ethnic differences.

### **Adolescence for Mei, Henny, and Devi**

During her adolescence, when she was studying at Junior High School, Mei (44 years old) just felt the difference in her relationships with her friends. She felt that her friends preferred to hang out closely with those who come from the same religion. Meanwhile, Henny (43 years old) who is not much different from Mei's age, felt that her adolescence was better than her childhood because in Junior High School she was able to associate more freely with non-Chinese ethnic groups. When she was in Junior High School, Henny hang out with her friends called "indigenous" (who were different from her as Chinese ethnic), and she considered them to be treating her well, not bullying or isolating her. However, in these inter-ethnic relationships, she only did at school, and in her home environment, she is still limited to socializing. Devi, who is only 22 years old, emphasizes her busy life as a teenager. She keeps herself busy by joining school organizations, studying, opening an online shop and helping her mother to sell snacks. She also claimed to have many friends at the time, and did not mention at all about the ethnic discrimination she experienced.

During their adolescence, the three informants grew up in areas that were quite close together, namely Mei in the Gunungsindur area, Bogor, Henny in Kedaung, Ciputat and Devi in Cikokol, Tangerang. Thus, regionally, there is no significant difference between the three regions, but the significant difference is in terms of age or time when they went through their adolescence. From the explanation above, it can be concluded that Mei only realized the difference in relationships based on religion when she entered her adolescence. On the other hand, Henny got a breath of fresh air from socializing with friends from different ethnics. Her childhood fear that she would be bullied by those who came from a different ethnicity, was not fully realized.

### **Adulthood for Mei, Henny dan Devi**

In adulthood, Mei (44 years old) said that she was more introverted. She shared that she worked in a company of 30 employees, with superiors and senior employees generally from the majority group, which made Mei part of the minority group and she had fewer friends. But on the other hand Henny (43 years old) in her adulthood, has the

freedom to associate and make friends. During her high school years and work, Henny thought that her friends were kind, did not bully or ridicule her, and did not discriminate against her because of her ethnic background. Devi (22 years old) describes her adulthood as a tough one because she had to work and study at the same time, while her friends could comfortably attend college. However, she described that in adulthood she learned to accept and loved himself, and to take the positive side of things.

From the explanation above, it can be seen that Mei (44 years old) in her growth from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, began to feel the complexity of inter-ethnic relationships, which involved majority and minority relationships. As a child, she felt the same as other children, but as she grew older, she began to understand the existence of friction based on religious and ethnic differences. On the other hand, Henny (43 years old) in the process of socializing becomes an adult, and has greater freedom, to determine the friends she engages in her relationships with. She opened up her relationships with non-Chinese people and had quite a pleasant social experience, namely that she was not bullied as her parents had feared. On the other hand, in her adulthood, Devi was more preoccupied with economic problems, and the problem of losing her father, than with inter-ethnic relationships. Devi does not seem to have much difficulty in these inter-ethnic relationships.

### **The word Indigenous, Indonesian-Chinese Stereotypes and the Meaning of Being Indonesian**

The word indigenous is still a stumbling block for Indonesians-Chinese. The three informants interviewed in this research have a fairly modern opinion in viewing this term. Both Mei (44 years old), Henny (43 years old) and Devi (22 years old) view that the term "indigenous" is not the right term to distinguish ethnic Chinese from citizens who are considered native Indonesians. The three of them see themselves as native Indonesians because they and their parents, even their great-grandparents were born in Indonesia. The three also disagree with the use of the term "indigenous" to distinguish those who are Indonesians-Chinese from other ethnic groups in Indonesia. Devi considers that the term "indigenous" has existed since the colonial era. She believes that the term "indigenous" should be given to people born and raised in Indonesia, including Indonesians-Chinese.

In reflecting on how she grew up in Indonesia, Mei (44 years old) describes herself as growing up far from luxurious, very different from the stereotype that develops in society that an Indonesian Chinese always comes from the upper middle class. Mei also had to change schools during elementary school five times, dropped out of school for a year and never had a place to live. She wanted to continue her studies, but her parents did not have the money. In adulthood, Mei also experienced ups and downs in her business. She had managed to open a stationery shop near the BHK Catholic School which was quite developed until she managed to hire three employees, but the business went bankrupt because of the Covid-19 pandemic. She was forced to open a new business, namely an online stationery bookstore, after 17 years of pioneering her



stationery business near the BHK Catholic School. Meanwhile, Henny (43 years old) saw the development of her relationship with non-Chinese ethnic groups, marking her growing up in Indonesia. In childhood, her parents restricted her from socializing with non-Chinese friends, after which the restrictions gradually diminished. During her teenage and adulthood, Henny hang out a lot with non-Chinese friends, and had good experiences, not being bullied as her parents feared. Henny believes that good relationships work because of mutual respect, and care. Devi (22 years old) felt differently when she grew up in Indonesia. The issue of ethnic discrimination didn't bother her, but the only problem that bothers her is losing her father, which made Devi struggle to overcome her sadness. To overcome her sadness, Devi tries to keep herself busy by organizing, selling in online shops, helping mothers sell snacks and teaching high school lessons.

## Conclusion

Through interviews with three informants in this research, namely Mei (44 years old), Henny (43 years old) and Devi (22 years old), it can be concluded that all three have quite different stories from the three informants in previous research. Mei (44 years old) in her growth from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, began to feel the complexity of inter-ethnic relationships, which involved majority and minority relationships. Devi (22 years old) who grew up in the same country and is relatively new, doesn't seem to have much difficulty in inter-ethnic relationships in childhood, adolescence and adulthood. The main problems that she faced were the loss of her father and the family's economic problems. Meanwhile, Henny (43 years old) in the process of becoming an adult has actually experienced a reversal of the tide compared to what Mei felt. As she grew older, Henny became freer to choose to open herself to non-Chinese ethnics, and it turned out that she did not experience the bullying her parents had feared when she was young.

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