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‘We are people of the Islands’: Translocal belonging among the ethnic Chinese of the Riau Islands

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ABSTRACT

The Riau Islands Chinese are an anomaly in the study of Chinese Indonesians. For one, while many of their ethnic Chinese counterparts in other parts of Indonesia can no longer speak Chinese due to the New Order regime’s assimilation policy, Chinese languages are alive and well in the Riau Islands. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2017–2018, this paper seeks to understand the Riau Islands Chinese’s cultural resilience and sense of belonging as a borderland ethnic minority. I argue that long-standing inter-Island and cross-border mobilities and cultural flows with Singapore have been central to the maintenance of Riau Islands Chinese identity. Utilising translocality as a theoretical framework to understand the processes of identity formation and place-making that transcend national borders, I contend that the case study of the Riau Islands Chinese challenges the conventional state-centric modes of analyses prevalent in the study of ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia.

KEYWORDS

Chinese Indonesians, Riau Islands, ethnic Chinese, identity, local politics, Singapore

Introduction

Nestled between the busy waterways of the Strait of Malacca to the north-west, the South China Sea to the north, and the Karimata Strait to the south-east, the Islands that make up the Riau Archipelago¹ are very strategically located. For centuries, this group of over 3,200 Islands has been at the centre of pre-colonial and colonial-era trade flows that connected Southeast Asia to China, the Indian Ocean world, Europe, and beyond. The Riau Archipelago is also home to diverse ethnic groups that came to the Islands in successive waves of migration from at least the 15th Century. The Malays, Chinese, and Bugis were some of the earliest settlers in the Archipelago, while the Javanese, Minangkabau, and Batak settlers (among others) came later, mostly after Indonesia’s independence.

Generations of Riau islanders lived through tumultuous historical periods that saw the rise and fall of the Johor Sultanate, the arrival of European colonial powers, and the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty that divided the Johor-Riau Archipelago into two: Singapore and Johor to the north became British territory, while the rest of the Riau Islands to the south came under Dutch control. In the post-colonial era, the Riau Islands became part of Indonesia, and in 1957, the Islands were merged with mainland Riau (Riau *daratan* in the local Malay) on the eastern coast of Sumatra to form the province of Riau. The Islands’ political fortunes changed again in 2004 when they were granted regional autonomy to separate from mainland Riau and become their own province of Riau Islands (Kepulauan Riau, ‘Kepri’ for short). As I will demonstrate in this paper, amidst all these geopolitical changes, the

archipelago's ethnic Chinese communities continued to thrive and maintained strong kin and social networks across the Islands.

This paper focuses on the ethnic Chinese of Indonesia's Riau Islands province, which at around 8.5% of the province's total population² represents the highest proportion of ethnic Chinese of any province in Indonesia (though the provinces of Bangka-Belitung and West Kalimantan come close). As has been documented by scholars such as Lenore Lyons and Michele Ford,³ the Riau Islands Chinese are unique in that, unlike many ethnic Chinese communities in Indonesia that no longer speak Chinese due to the enforcement of the New Order regime's assimilation policy from 1967 to 1998, languages such as Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, and Mandarin are still very much alive and well.⁴ Furthermore, many of the community and cultural practices (e.g. clan association activities, cultural festivals, performing arts, temple rituals) that have either disappeared or become rarities in other Chinese Indonesian communities are still well maintained in the Riau Islands.

In this paper, I examine some of the factors that have contributed to the cultural and linguistic resilience of the Riau Islands Chinese since the creation of the Indonesian nation state to today. I analyse how contemporary Riau Islands Chinese conceptualise their identity as local, national, and transnational subjects, particularly since their Chinese cultural identity and social networks appear to be much more 'intact' compared to ethnic Chinese in other parts of Indonesia, especially in Java. So far, studies of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia have predominantly examined local Chinese identities in terms of how well they 'fit' within Indonesia's ethno-nationalist brand of national belonging.⁵ However, the Riau Islands Chinese do not quite fit within this rigid framework. For one, their existence as borderland people located far from Indonesia's capital of Jakarta has meant that the Riau Islands Chinese have been relatively sheltered from anti-Chinese sentiments at the national level and the state's assimilation efforts. Furthermore, the Islands' proximity to Chinese-majority Singapore has enabled a high level of cross-border exchanges and mobilities that have made the confines of the nation state feel much less relevant.

I argue that the identity politics and cultural resilience of the Riau Islands Chinese need to be understood within the context of the Islands' geographic location in the strategic maritime borderlands between the modern states of Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia. As an ethnic minority who inhabit a region that historian Ng Chin-Keong⁶ calls 'an overlapping frontier' of multiple polities (i.e. the territorial frontier of Indonesia, the economic frontier of Singapore, and the cultural frontier of the Chinese in Indonesia, Singapore, and China), the Islands' geography and archipelagic networks have shaped the collective memory, mobility, adaptation strategies, and version of Chineseness adopted by the Riau Islands Chinese.

Indeed, whenever asked about their sense of identity, the majority of the Riau Islands Chinese I interviewed would commonly refer to themselves as '*orang kepulauan*' (people of the archipelago/Islands). While they also view themselves as ethnic Chinese and as citizens of Indonesia, their primary form of belonging is very much rooted in the Riau Archipelago as the 'local' area in which they belong. Informants would tell me about the specific Islands in which they were born and how they have vast networks of relatives (*saudara*, the broadly applied Indonesian term for various kinds of kin, no matter how far removed) and relations (*kenalan*) all over the Riau Archipelago, including in Singapore and Johor. They also told me of their frequent inter-Island commutes to nearby Singapore – which takes about one hour by ferry from the province's main Islands of Batam and Bintan – for business, work, shopping, family visits, education, and leisure. To the Riau Islands Chinese, as has been the case for two centuries, Singapore (and to a lesser extent the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula) is imagined as very much part of their 'local' area, even though international borders now separate the Islands. This local/transnational nexus is not uncommon for borderland communities, but as I will demonstrate in this paper, what makes the Riau Islands Chinese unique is the fact that their geographic and cultural closeness with Singapore was one of the main reasons why they were able to maintain their Chinese language abilities and relative cultural freedom throughout the New Order's assimilation policy. Here, I suggest that contemporary Riau Islands Chinese consider

Singapore – not Jakarta or any other cities/communities in Indonesia or China and greater China more broadly – to be the epicentre of their version of archipelagic Chineseness.

This paper is based on ethnographic data collected during multiple fieldwork visits (usually lasting one week to several weeks at a time) to Batam, Bintan, and Karimun from 2017–2018. Throughout the course of fieldwork, I conducted interviews and participant observation with around thirty-five research respondents from different socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, and age groups, ten of whom became key informants for this paper. Because of the study's focus on inter-Island and cross-border connections, most research informants were ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs, leaders of Chinese social organisations and clan associations, and local politicians who frequently travel between the Islands and to Singapore for business. However, interviews and observations were also conducted among Riau Islands Chinese who at first glance did not appear to engage in as much travel (e.g. housewives, local small business owners, students), but who upon closer examination also possess dynamic archipelagic ties and patterns of mobility.

I begin the paper with a brief history of ethnic Chinese settlements and circulations in the Riau Archipelago throughout different periods and changing socio-political circumstances. I show how, throughout the New Order, the Riau Islands Chinese relied on their social networks and geographic proximity to Singapore as means to preserve their cultural identity and resist the assimilationist efforts of the state. Utilising the concept of translocality as a theoretical framework to understand the processes of identity formation and place-making that transcends national borders, I analyse how the Riau Islands Chinese have taken advantage of their strategic geographic location not only to survive assimilation but to thrive culturally and economically.

Lastly, I discuss how the local political participation of Riau Islands Chinese in the post-Suharto era has been motivated by the desire to protect their rootedness, belonging, and influence in the archipelago that they have for centuries called home. I conclude this paper with the argument that the case study of ethnic Chinese communities in the Riau Islands contributes to the literature on translocal borderland ethnic communities and challenges the conventional state-centric modes of analyses prevalent in the study of ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia.

Locating the Riau Islands Chinese

We have long understood the importance of place and locality in the processes of identity construction. Since local spaces represent stability, constancy, and materiality, individuals and groups draw on these familiar surrounds to give them a sense of rootedness and belonging. Localities shape our everyday routines and patterns of movement, and we also think of work, kinship, and social networks in spatialised terms. For anthropologists, localities provide convenient domains by which configurations of local and national identities may be analysed. However, complexities arise when a community's sense of locality becomes destabilised by changes in geopolitical, economic, and social structures. For instance, when the establishment of new borders segregate previously unified local communities, those communities' patterns of behaviour and sense of identity may be irreversibly altered.

The evolving nature of localities is why Arjun Appadurai cautions us that locality should not be taken as a given. After all, localities are not just collections of fixed material and geographic markers within a specific territory. Rather, localities – and thus local subjects – are produced and reproduced through deliberate acts, rituals, and patterns of mobilities that socialise and contextualise specific spaces. Here, Appadurai writes:

I view locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial. I see it as a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts.⁷

The definition of a group's locality requires constant maintenance and negotiation, especially amidst changing historical circumstances that threaten the locality's integrity or conditions, such as changes in governance, national regimes, socio-economic upheavals, and global processes. In the same vein, a sense of locality may also be maintained through new technologies and modern means of travel that enable interconnectivity across borders. As such, in any study of local belonging, scholars need to pay attention to what Appadurai terms 'the spatiotemporal production of locality.'⁸

As a people that has for over two centuries existed in strategic waterways divided firstly by colonial territorial boundaries and later by modern national borders, the Chinese of the Riau Islands have long cultivated inter-Island and cross-border archipelagic social networks to survive and thrive. These ties have persisted to today, and the sphere of frequent mobilities and kinship/social connections of the contemporary Riau Islands Chinese go beyond the territorial boundaries of the Indonesian nation state. Almost every Riau Islands Chinese I encountered during fieldwork said that they had family and friends in the other Islands or in Singapore/peninsular Malaysia. The ease of inter-Island and international archipelagic travel has meant that frequent licit/illicit movements where they conduct business, visit, or live with relatives in the other Islands are commonplace. Indeed, for the Riau Islands Chinese, their concept of locality includes a vast maritime territory that in the present day incorporates the nation states of Singapore and Malaysia. Here, their identity politics are played out locally, yet their sense of spatial rootedness is transnational. They are thus a people who are simultaneously local and transnational. Far from being a problem, I argue that this seemingly contradictory local/transnational mode of belonging has become a source of strength for the Riau Islands Chinese over the years.

In writing this paper, I found translocality to be a useful concept in understanding the local/transnational identity of the Riau Islands Chinese.⁹ Appadurai first coined the term translocality to describe the ways in which emplaced communities become extended through the geographical mobility of their inhabitants.¹⁰ Similarly, Clemens Greiner and Patrick Sakdapolrak argue that translocality describes the 'socio-spatial dynamics and processes of simultaneity and identity formation that transcend boundaries – including, but also extending beyond, those of nation states.'¹¹ Often conflated with transnationalism, translocality is nevertheless a different concept. Whereas transnationalism is most often used to describe the 'multiple identities' that result from the processes of negotiating the seemingly contradictory categories of identity such as national versus international and origin versus destination, translocality tries to capture how mobilities and social networks that span across national borders result in the formation of unique conceptions of space, subjectivities, and forms of belonging.¹² At the same time, translocality also recognises the continuing importance of place and locality as sources of meaning amidst transnational movements.¹³

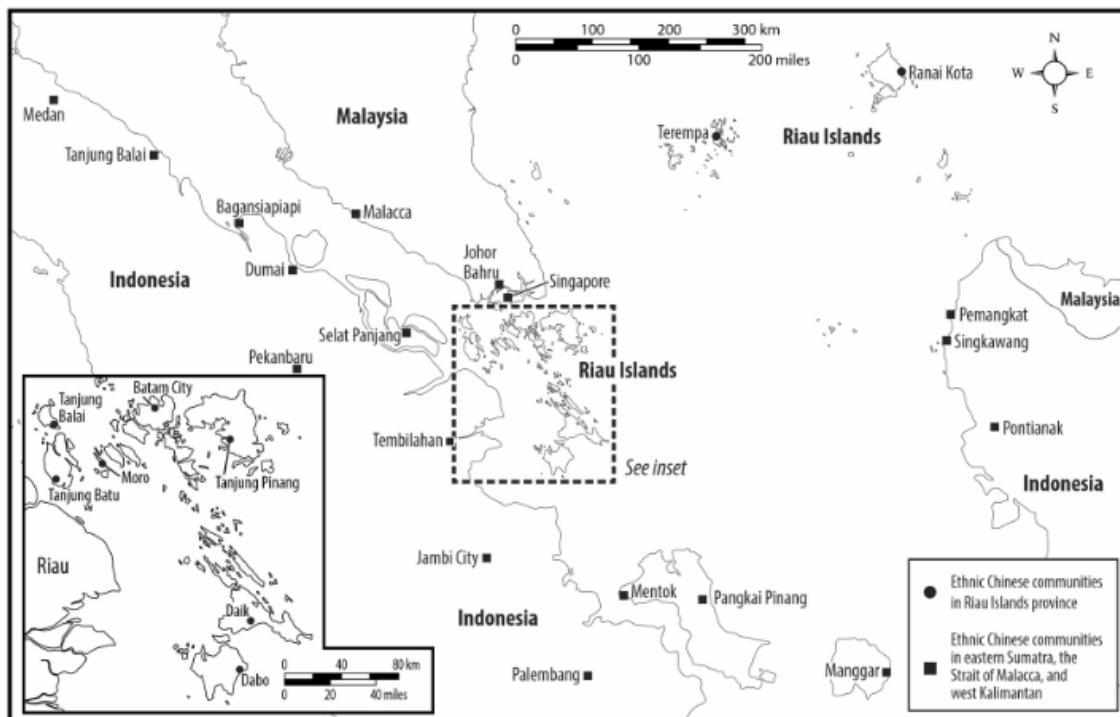
The Riau Islands Chinese fit within this definition of translocality, whereby as a borderland ethnic minority, they draw on their long history of archipelagic interconnectivity to create a specific sense of locality and Chinese identity that is rooted in their geographic location and mobilities within the broader Riau Archipelago maritime region. While this kind of translocal identification can also be found in other border regions,¹⁴ what makes the case of the Riau Islands Chinese unique is the fact that their sense of self as 'people of the Islands' with extensive transnational links with Singapore became an important part of the struggle to maintain their cultural agency against externally imagined ethnic categories enforced by the Indonesian nation state.

Chinese settlements and circulations in the Riau Archipelago

While it is not entirely clear when the ethnic Chinese began settling in the Riau Archipelago, communities of southern Chinese traders and fishermen speaking languages such as Hokkien, Teochew, and Hakka were found in the Islands of Bintan, Batam, Karimun, Penyengat – and even in the more far-flung Islands such as Natuna in the north – since at least the 18th Century.¹⁵ In 1734–1740, the second viceroy of Riau, Daeng Celak, decided to bring Chinese workers to Bintan in order to establish and run gambier plantations.¹⁶ These Chinese settlers played an important part in the

establishment of towns and ports in the Riau Islands, most significantly in the establishment of the town of Tanjung Pinang in the Island of Bintan. Now considered to be the centre of Malay-ness in the Riau Archipelago, it was founded in the late 1780s by Chinese plantation workers.¹⁷ By the 1780s, over 10,000 Chinese workers were resident on Bintan, and the port was noted by European visitors as ‘one of the most frequented trading posts in Southeast Asia.’¹⁸ By 1852, the Chinese accounted for at least 85% of Tanjung Pinang’s population, while the ‘natives’ (which included those identified as Malays, Bugis, Javanese, and others) comprised a mere 11.6%.¹⁹ Many of the Chinese traders were simultaneously adventurers, smugglers, thugs, local businessmen, and leaders of the Chinese community with strong ties with other Chinese communities along the Strait of Malacca, the east coast of Sumatra, and west Borneo. Indeed, as can be seen in Figure 1, Chinese communities in the Riau Archipelago really need to be understood within the geographical context of other proximate Chinese communities in the maritime region of the Strait of Malacca and Karimata Strait.

Figure 1. Major Riau Islands Chinese settlements in context of other Chinese settlements in the broader Strait of Malacca and Riau Archipelago maritime region. Map by Mike Bechthold. Copyright Charlotte Setjadi.



Throughout the centuries, inter-Island networks were key to the survival and prosperity of the Riau Archipelago Chinese. After the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824, the Chinese continued to utilise their knowledge of the Strait of Malacca waterways to traverse the Dutch-British border that separated Singapore and Johor from the rest of the archipelago.²⁰ Furthermore, during Indonesia’s *Konfrontasi* with Malaysia, when inter-border trades between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore were halted, kinship ties and connections with other Chinese communities across the Riau Islands, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Taiwan were crucial in ensuring a steady supply of commodities that prevented the Chinese merchants from going bankrupt. These more illicit traders ensured access to goods, even during hard times and after borders were enforced, by paying local military officials to let them cross otherwise impassable fronts.²¹ Even the Minang and Batak traders often relied on these Chinese smuggling syndicates to get their goods moving as well.²²

Not only for smuggling activities, Chinese kinship and social networks were also instrumental in the movement of people across the archipelago. Since Singapore’s establishment in 1819, Chinese migrants circulated between Singapore and Riau Islands settlements, following work and educational

opportunities, and often going back-and-forth between the Islands.²³ For example, at the turn of the 20th Century when the tin industry and gambier cultivation peaked in the Islands, many Chinese came from Singapore as contract labourers, and then moved back to Singapore in the 1930s when these industries declined following the Great Depression. Similarly, on the eve of the Japanese occupation in 1942, many Chinese fled Singapore and other towns in the Malayan Peninsula to seek refuge in the Riau Islands, and then returned when World War II ended.²⁴ An example of the fluid mobilities of the Chinese in Singapore and the Riau Islands during the colonial period can be seen in the life trajectory of Wee Boon Teng, who was born in Singapore in 1964 but then left to join his relatives' business in Selat Panjang where he became a successful trader and leader of the Chinese community.²⁵ Wee was appointed by the Dutch colonial administration as the *Kapitan Cina* (Chinese Captain) of Selat Panjang in 1915, and he was eventually promoted to the rank of *Majoor* (Mayor) of Selat Panjang before retiring and returning to Singapore where he died in 1939.²⁶

Indeed, up until the mid-20th Century, the Chinese of the Riau Islands were part of the communities of Nanyang (literally 'the South Seas' in Chinese, but often translated to 'Southeast Asia') Chinese with extensive inter-Island connections and exchanges. These connections also meant that it was (and still is) commonplace for more well-to-do Riau Islands Chinese families with connections in Singapore to send their children there to continue their high school and/or further education in Singaporean Chinese schools. The circulation of Chinese teachers²⁷ and cultural materials²⁸ that passed through the Riau Archipelago from the early 20th century also ensured that Chinese language and education (especially Mandarin) were maintained. What is clear is that these archipelagic connections were key in the economic and cultural survival of the Riau Islands Chinese throughout different periods. Indeed, this same resilience and strategic mobility proved to be instrumental to the cultural and economic endurance of the Riau Islands Chinese throughout the New Order.

Assimilation in the borderlands

Following Indonesia's proclamation of independence in 1945, the political uncertainties concerning the place of the ethnic Chinese in the new nation changed the status and sense of belonging of the Riau Islands Chinese. In terms of the administration of the Islands, in 1957, the Riau Islands were combined with Riau *daratan* (mainland Riau) in the east coast of Sumatra to form the new province of Riau, with the city of Pekanbaru in the hinterland of mainland Riau as the capital. While, as Barbara Andaya²⁹ points out, Riau *daratan* and Riau *kepulauan* ('Islands' in Malay) have historically had strong cultural, social, and economic allegiance, the lumping together of the two Riaus under the administration of a Pekanbaru-based government meant that much of the Riau Islands' autonomy and decision-making capabilities – especially regarding the administration of their natural resources – were diminished.

For the Chinese, beginning in the mid-1950s, their legal status was suddenly under scrutiny. After years of ambiguity concerning the citizenship status of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, Indonesia and China signed the Dual Nationality Treaty of 1955. The ethnic Chinese in Indonesia had to choose whether they wanted to take up Chinese or Indonesian citizenship; if they wished to be an Indonesian citizen, then they had to renounce their Chinese citizenship and vice versa.³⁰ Like many other Chinese throughout Indonesia, this political development thrust the Riau Islands Chinese into the difficult situation of selecting a national allegiance and belonging. The majority of Riau Islands Chinese chose Indonesian citizenship, but there were also those who chose Chinese citizenship and left the Islands to go 'back' to China.

The situation for the Chinese worsened after President Sukarno issued a Presidential Regulation (PP10/1959) in November 1959 that banned 'foreign' (*asing*) trades in rural areas. Intended as a populist measure to provide favourable conditions for *pribumi* (native/indigenous) businesses, this regulation forbade foreigners from owning businesses outside of designated urban centres. However, in practice, the regulation was also enforced on the ethnic Chinese who were already Indonesian citizens. PP10/1959 also affected the Riau Archipelago, where the Chinese population in urban

centres such as Batam and Tanjung Pinang increased from the influx of Chinese from the outer Islands following the closure of many rural Chinese-owned businesses. According to Ng, PP10/1959 also caused some Chinese-owned businesses – especially those in agribusiness – to move their administrative operations to Singapore.³¹

Eddie,³² an elder in several Karimun Chinese social organisations, told me that his father's family moved to Tanjung Balai sometime after 1959 when they succumbed to pressure to move their agricultural export business that was originally located on Kundur Island. He also recalled how some businesses shuttered and left the Riau Islands altogether:

My father's family came from Kundur [Island], and they had a business exporting various agricultural products, mostly to Singapore. However, after PP10, there was a lot of pressure for Chinese-owned businesses in the rural areas to close or move to the bigger cities, so my father and his family moved to Tanjung Balai ... My father later told me that he knew of some businesses that moved to Singapore, although many ended up closing down altogether because they were just small shops or businesses.

Eddie and other ethnic Chinese elders who still had memory of the impacts of PP10 told me that the regulation, along with the anti-Chinese sentiments it roused at the time, made life difficult for the Riau Islands Chinese. However, similar to the observation that Ng made in 1976,³³ they also told me that many of the Chinese businesses that retreated to Singapore continued their Riau Islands operations by proxy. For instance, some relatives may have stayed behind in the Riau Islands to continue on-site production or procurement of goods (often without the proper licensing) although the business was officially administered from Singapore.

When Suharto's New Order government enforced the assimilation policy in 1967, like other Chinese in Indonesia, the Riau Islands Chinese were affected, most notably with the closure of Chinese medium schools and the name-changing policy that saw Chinese Indonesians 'encouraged' to change their names to Indonesian-sounding ones (e.g. Tan to Tanuwijaya, Lim to Salim). As my informant Tony, a prominent businessman in his 60s from Tanjung Pinang, recounts, the Riau Islands Chinese had to quickly adjust to the new realities of life under the New Order:

I was a teenager when the Chinese schools were closed. That was hard for a lot of people, and the Chinese school principals and teachers were suddenly out of a job. A lot of them left for Singapore ... I also remember that we all had to change our names to Indonesian names, which my father and his friends thought was insulting, since our [Chinese] names are ancestral names. But what can you do? Besides, people in the community still called me by my Chinese nickname anyway, even until today, so my name only changed on official documents.

At the same time, as part of the cultural policy adopted by the New Order government, every province in Indonesia became officially associated with a specific *pribumi* ethnic group to the exclusion of others, thereby naturalising the notion that ethnicity and locality presumed each other – an idea that Tom Boellstorff termed 'ethnolocality'.³⁴ The principal aim of this measure was to conciliate each province's main ethnic groups and defuse the potential of divisive ethnic diversity within individual regions, while at the same time still appearing to do justice to a notion of 'Unity in Diversity' across the entire nation.³⁵ The New Order-era province of Riau was unofficially designated as a Malay province,³⁶ a move that was also intended to appease the province's Malay elites who regarded both Riau *daratan* and *kepulauan* as part of the homeland of the *bangsa Melayu* (Malay nation/race).³⁷ Such definitive politicisation of Malay identity during the New Order marked a decisive point that excluded the ethnic Chinese from being able to lay claim to belonging in the province's history and culture. Unsurprisingly, such emphasis on the Malayness of Riau province led to resentment on the part of the Chinese (as well as other ethnic groups, such as long-time Javanese migrants), who felt that their own place in the region's history was neglected.

Despite the official erasure of Chineseness from national and provincial cultural narratives, and while the Riau Islands Chinese did suffer some of the effects of the assimilation policy, the situation in the Riau Islands was less severe than in other parts of Indonesia. As Lyons and Ford point out in their 2013 study of the Chinese in Karimun, unlike in Java and mainland Sumatra where the implementation of assimilation laws was much stricter, Chinese socio-religious organisations and public use of Chinese languages were able to continue with relatively little interruption in the Riau Islands.³⁸ The large concentration of Chinese populations in some communities certainly contributed to community language retention,³⁹ but the factor of geography also mattered, especially on the outer Islands. According to informants such as Rina, a housewife in her late 40s originally from Lingga Island, the isolation of the outer Islands is one of the reasons why many Riau Islands Chinese communities were left unaffected by the assimilation laws:

When I was growing up, the population in Lingga was small, and it was a sleepy Island where the main industry was fishing ... The Chinese owned most of the shops in Daik [the main village in Lingga], and we were mostly left alone since the Malays knew that we had been there for a long time ... Besides, who was going to come and enforce assimilation in a place like Lingga? The local Malays knew that Chinese businesses were important for the Island. We [the Chinese] kept on with our traditions, my family still spoke Hakka, and at least my family never felt the effects of assimilation.

Similar comments were made by informants who came from the outer Islands, but even those from Tanjung Pinang and Batam said that, for the most part, everyday life carried on as normal, and the observance of Chinese culture and rituals remained relatively unaffected throughout the New Order.

Traversing borders and orientating towards Singapore

Frequent legal and illegal border crossings and circulation of commodities are additional reasons as to why the Riau Islands Chinese managed to retain their Chinese language abilities and culture during the New Order. Even as the maritime border between Indonesia and Singapore tightened in the 1970s, the ease of sea travel between Singapore and the Riau Islands towns of Batam, Bintan, and Tanjung Balai meant that it was (and still is) very easy for Riau Islands Chinese to conduct daily or weekly trips to Singapore and vice versa.⁴⁰ As Ford and Lyons noted in their 2020 study,⁴¹ illegal cross-border activities between the Riau Islands and Singapore occurred regularly and over time became part of the mundane aspects of the everyday lives of the islanders.

Indeed, for the Riau Islands Chinese, the new national borders did not hinder them from continuing the patterns of mobility of their ancestors. For instance, in his biography *The Tiger from Archipelago*,⁴² Tanjung Pinang Chinese politician, businessman, community leader, and former gangster Bobby Jayanto (Jauw Bu Hui) recounted how, following in the footsteps of his smuggler father, he started his own career by crossing over to Singapore illegally as a teen in the early 1970s. Boarding a small *sampan* (wooden boat) in the middle of the night, Jayanto and his friends sailed to Pasir Panjang beach in Singapore without any paperwork. Jayanto then lived with his aunt in Toa Payoh as an undocumented migrant while he slowly became involved with Singapore's Chinese mafia.⁴³ In an interview, Jayanto told me that, tired of a gangster's life, he eventually came back to Tanjung Pinang and utilised the business connections he had made in Singapore, Malaysia and elsewhere to build successful businesses in hospitality, gambling, trading, and cable television service among others.

While Jayanto's life trajectory may be extreme, his story of crossings to Singapore is typical of the mobility pattern of the average Riau Islands Chinese. Abun, an ethnic Teochew man in his 50s who runs a building supplies business in Tanjung Balai told me that, from the 1970s onwards, Riau Islands Chinese like himself viewed Singapore as their 'capital city' and not Jakarta. Abun added that Singapore was so close (*dekat*) that going to Singapore was nothing unusual for Chinese like him.

Going to Jakarta, on the other hand, was much more difficult, time consuming, and unusual, especially since they did not have family relations or established networks in Jakarta. Abun said:

For us, going to Singapore did not feel like we were going to another country. You can see Singapore from Batam, and it [Singapore] is so nearby. There was no point of going to Jakarta when you could get anything you could possibly want from Singapore. Jakarta was more unfamiliar to us compared to Singapore.

Abun and other informants told me that ordinary Riau Islands Chinese families would go to Singapore on weekends to go shopping for consumer goods that were not yet available in the Islands, or anywhere else in Indonesia. They proudly boasted that this was why Riau Islanders always had the newest electronic goods from Singapore. Andri, a Tanjung Balai Chinese informant in his 30s who at the time of interview was living in Singapore, told me that when he was growing up in the 1990s, there was a ‘hierarchy’ of consumer goods in the Islands, where islanders differentiated between goods imported from Singapore and those from Jakarta. This was true even when the brand and the product was the same (e.g. the same brand of Sunsilks shampoo). This was because there was widespread perception that goods from Singapore were of higher quality, therefore making them desirable and fuelling a lucrative industry of (mostly Chinese) shoppers and smugglers who would go to Singapore to shop for consumer goods and then sell them at a slightly marked-up rate back in the Islands.

As they did in the past, wealthier Riau Islands Chinese families sent their children for high school education and/or university in Singapore. Many of these children ended up becoming permanent residents or citizens of Singapore, essentially becoming ‘anchor’ family members that could facilitate the purchase of property, business ventures, or the future migration of other family members. For poorer Chinese, it was common to go back and forth to Singapore for seasonal low-skilled labour work (usually for around two weeks per visit), given that Indonesian citizens automatically receive a 30-day visitors’ visa upon entry to Singapore. Ford and Lyons argue that many of those who engaged in illicit border activities ‘simply did not realise that a particular activity was unlawful.’⁴⁴ Indeed, many of the Chinese I spoke to said that it was ‘*biasa*’ (normal/usual) for people to go to Singapore for a few weeks at a time for work, or to bulk-purchase goods to sell back in the Islands without paying the necessary customs duties. As Ford and Lyons point out, the Indonesian border authorities were generally very much aware of the economic contributions of illegal movements of people and goods along the Singapore-Johor-Riau Island corridor.⁴⁵ Illicit activities were thus tolerated by the (often complicit) officials, and as long-standing key players within this shadow industry, the Riau Islands Chinese were deemed as assets by provincial administrators.

Furthermore, in terms of cultural flows, the geographic proximity with Singapore meant that Chinese cultural commodities from Singapore were readily available in the Riau Islands through technologies such as satellite dishes, which were popular in the ‘90s. Indeed, while (mostly pirated) cultural materials from Singapore and the rest of the Chinese-speaking world have historically been readily available in the Riau Islands, Mandarin-language television channels from Singapore that reached the Islands meant that there was a daily supply of Chinese language materials in the form of TV dramas (especially from the *wuxia* martial arts genre). This was the case even in the 1970s, when television was not yet available in mainland Sumatra.⁴⁶ Fuifui, a Batam-based shop owner in her early 40s, remembers growing up watching Mandarin TV dramas that were broadcast from Singapore:

In the mid-1990s, we’d watch Mandarin TV shows from Channel 8 [Singapore’s Mandarin-language TV channel] when we came home from school, and the whole family would watch *kung-fu* shows like *The Return of the Condor Heroes* at night ... Some of these shows were available on Indonesian TV channels too, but they were always dubbed in Indonesian while we were able to watch them in Mandarin ... My family spoke Hokkien at home, but because of these TV shows, and all the Mandarin pop songs that I used to listen to, I think my Mandarin became better than my Hokkien [laughs].

This tendency among Riau Islands Chinese to orient themselves culturally towards Singapore persists, even among younger informants. Rendy, a Batam café owner in his mid-twenties, reported that the clocks in his family home are set not to the Western Indonesia time zone that the Riau Islands belong to, but to Singapore time (one hour ahead):

All the clocks in our house are set to Singapore time because my grandmother wants to make sure that she doesn't miss her favourite TV shows [laughs] ... It's always been like this, especially since my father does a lot of business with people in Singapore anyway, and my sister lived there [in Singapore] when she went to college, so it made sense for us to set our clocks to Singapore time.

After the New Order government established Batam as a special industrial and economic zone in the 1980s, tax incentives and special licensing schemes were put in place to attract foreign investments, and by the 1990s, hundreds of foreign companies had established manufacturing and other operations in the Islands.⁴⁷ Many of these foreign companies were Singaporean; Riau Islands Chinese often acted as the local Indonesian partner in their business ventures. The foreign investment boom resulted in huge job creation and economic growth in the Riau Islands that eventually led to significant social change. Tourism from Singapore boomed after luxury resorts, hotels, golf courses, entertainment venues, restaurants, and shopping malls were built in places such as Batam and the northern coast of Bintan. As Carole Faucher pointed out in 2007, most of the luxury hotels, golf courses and expensive restaurants in Bintan and Batam were owned by local ethnic Chinese businessmen, sometimes in partnership with Chinese Singaporeans.⁴⁸ Along with the boom in tourism, the vice industries of gambling, prostitution, and drugs also prospered in the 1990s.⁴⁹ Many (mostly Chinese) Singaporean men kept mistresses and second families in the Islands.⁵⁰

Local Chinese were instrumental in providing services for these Chinese Singaporean investors and tourists. My informants told me that Mandarin proficiency became an asset in a hospitality industry that was geared towards catering to Singaporean Chinese tourists, and their networks were useful in meeting tourist requests, including cars, drivers, guides, escorts, prostitutes, alcohol, drugs, and access to exclusive nightclubs and gambling establishments. Furthermore, since pilgrimages to Chinese temples and ancestral halls in the Riau Islands were also a big source of tourism income from Singapore, temple and clan associations were allowed to operate. Once again, understanding that Chineseness was an important asset in dealings with Singaporeans, authorities were content to allow local Chinese to continue speaking and acting as before the assimilation policy. As a prominent entrepreneur with businesses throughout the Riau Islands, my informant Tony told me that provincial administrators invited businessmen like him to meetings with Chinese Singaporean businessmen to forge connections and to 'make a show that the Riau Islands were a safe place for Chinese people.'

Collective memory and translocal Riau Islands identity

The peculiarities of the Riau Islands' local history and close connection with Singapore have had a profound impact on how the Riau Islands Chinese perceive their sense of identity as Chinese Indonesians. Firstly, among my informants, there was generally an understanding of the 'abnormality' of their situation compared to their ethnic Chinese counterparts in other parts of Indonesia, whereby the Riau Islands Chinese lived in a bubble that has been relatively unaffected by Indonesian national politics. This is not to say that Riau Islands Chinese are not affected by some forms of everyday discriminatory practices towards the Chinese, such as having to pay higher fees for official documents and permits. However, as a whole, inter-ethnic relations between Chinese and non-Chinese in the Riau Islands have been relatively harmonious. As Nicholas J. Long notes in his 2013 study of contemporary Malay identities in the Riau Islands, the Islands-born Chinese were (and still are) not painted as the villains in contemporary accounts of Malay marginalisation.⁵¹ The blame for the exclusion of Malays from the marketplace has been placed squarely on the Minangkabau, the Bataks, Javanese, and migrants from other parts of Indonesia who moved to the Islands under the New Order's transmigration program and development of Batam and Bintan. Dullah, a Malay informant in

his 60s, explained that the Malays generally do not consider local-born Chinese '*orang dari luar*' (people from outside) like the Javanese, Minang, or Batak newcomers; instead, they are referred to as '*bangsa lain*' (of other stock). Thus, they are regarded as fellow islanders, albeit from a different race.

Furthermore, for the Riau Islands Chinese, there is a sense of security that comes from being so close to Singapore. To Fenny, an ethnic Hainanese woman in her 40s from Tanjung Balai, no matter how bad anti-Chinese sentiments got in the rest of Indonesia, she and her family knew that they could always quickly go to Singapore if trouble ever came to their doorstep. Like many other ethnic Chinese in the Riau Islands, Fenny recalled how, during the May 1998 riots and anti-Chinese attacks that took place in Jakarta and several other cities in the lead-up to the fall of the New Order, many Chinese from Jakarta and other cities in Java took refuge in Batam:

It was scary back then when we heard of the riots that were happening in Jakarta, and there were also many [Jakarta] Chinese who came to Batam because they thought that they could easily flee to Singapore if the situation got worse. We didn't really feel threatened because there weren't riots here [Riau Islands], but you couldn't help also feeling scared because the atmosphere was tense ... What happened made us feel lucky that we are so close to Singapore.⁵²

For Riau Islands Chinese like Fenny, the combination of traumatic memories of anti-Chinese sentiments at the national level and the feeling of safety that comes from geographic proximity to Singapore has resulted in a strong sense of attachment and belonging to the broader Riau Archipelagic region.

In their work on translocality, David Conradson and Deidre McKay highlight the importance of emotional and affective states in the shaping of unique translocal subjectivities.⁵³ Conradson and McKay also point out how a group's translocal subjectivity is also shaped by relational encounters with others outside their local community.⁵⁴ In conceptualising their sense of identity and place, the Riau Islands Chinese clearly compare their situation to a number of different reference groups. Unlike their ethnic Chinese counterparts from other parts of Indonesia, the Riau Islands Chinese do not view themselves as marginalised minorities in their locality. Rather, they have relative strength in numbers and historically harmonious co-existence with the local Malays. Furthermore, their spatial, cultural, and historical closeness to Chinese-majority Singapore have strengthened their sense of security in the archipelago that has protected them for so long. This is why the Riau Islands Chinese regard their translocal, cross-border identity as *orang kepulauan* (the people of the Islands) to be much more important than their national-level identity as Chinese Indonesians.

Claiming belonging in the *reformasi* era

In 2004, the Riau Islands' political fortunes changed again when, after years of negotiations led by the Malay then-Regent of Riau Islands Regency, Hoesrin Hood, the Islands of Batam, Bintan, Karimun, as well as three other Island groups were separated from Riau province to establish the new province of Riau Islands. Over the next decade, more resources and responsibilities were transferred to the new regional government in Tanjung Pinang. For the Chinese, the creation of the new province opened an avenue for a more active role in local representational politics. Many Chinese were excited at the prospect of having a political say in the Islands that have been their home for centuries. This drive for political participation was not unique to Riau Islands Chinese. At the national level, Chinese identity politics flourished with the abolition of assimilation policies after Suharto's fall, and throughout the country, ethnic Chinese who for over three decades were barred from political office were enthusiastically entering politics once more.⁵⁵ However, Chinese identity politics in the Riau Islands differed from those elsewhere in Indonesia because of the wave of Malay nativism that swept through in the early *reformasi* years.

Scholars of Indonesian politics have noted how demands for regional autonomy went hand-in-hand with the rise of nativist politics in regions that for decades felt robbed and oppressed by the Jakarta government.⁵⁶ Particularly in regions – such as the Riau Islands – that received hundreds of thousands of migrants from Java under the New Order’s transmigration program, resentment towards Jakarta was also directed at Javanese migrants. Many regions witnessed nativist campaigns for *putera daerah* (literally ‘sons of the region’) to control local government and secure preferential treatment in the allocation of economic resources and bureaucratic positions. In the Riau Islands, local Malays demanded for *putera daerah* control by claiming ancestral ownership of Riau’s maritime region. Ethnic Chinese were excluded from this narrative of the Riau Islands as belonging to the Malays. As such, there was concern that the Chinese would lose the chance to have a political say and would be erased from local history and contemporary narrative.

Right from the new province’s planning stages, it was understood that the Malays as *putera daerah* would have priority for local government positions.⁵⁷ While this is nothing new,⁵⁸ it raised the alarm for many Chinese who realised that they would need to join political parties and stand for office if they wanted to participate in the new province’s governance. Chinese leaders were worried they would be left behind – or worse, vilified as an ‘outsider’ group along with transmigrants – in the new political environment. Budi, a businessman in his 60s and an elder of Batam Chinese organisations, recounted the prevailing sentiment among leaders of the Chinese communities when Riau Islands became a province in 2004:

As soon as Megawati approved Kepri [Riau Islands] to become a province, all of us leaders of the [Chinese] community immediately began thinking about what we needed to do next. The Malays were obviously going to get priority, so all other ethnic groups in the Islands began organising too to ensure representation in the new government ... Not just the Chinese, but the Javanese, Bataks, and Minangs were also strategising and consolidating our respective political powers ... We [the Chinese] could not have our own political power during New Order, and we knew that if we did not enter politics as soon as possible, then we’d get left out again.

Over the last fifteen years, ethnic Chinese candidates have been elected to the Regional People’s Representative Council⁵⁹ (DPRD) and to leadership positions in areas with large concentrations of Chinese in Tanjung Pinang, Batam, Lingga, and Karimun. For instance, local businessman Saptono Mustaqim was elected Vice Regent of Lingga Regency, and subsequently ran in Lingga for the provincial DPRD. At national level, ethnic Chinese candidates have also contested seats at the national People’s Representative (DPR) and Consultative (MPR) Councils. Election results have so far been relatively good. For instance, in the 2019 national legislative elections, ethnic Chinese politicians won one of four seats allocated to Riau Islands province in each of the two Houses of Parliament: Haripinto Tanuwijidaja is currently serving his second term as Senator, and Cen Sui Lan is currently serving her first term as a Representative at the DPR.⁶⁰ Cen also made history as the first ever ethnic Chinese woman to be elected to the DPR.

Amidst the excitement of renewed political representation, almost all the ethnic Chinese politicians I interviewed emphasised that what Riau Islands politicians cared most about was local politics. This was strongly evident when I conducted my initial fieldwork in January of 2017. At that time, the blasphemy trial of ethnic Chinese Christian former Governor of Jakarta Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) was well under way in Jakarta. Accused of blasphemy against the Quran (more specifically Al-Maidah verse 51) at a speech made in North Jakarta in September 2016, anti-Ahok demonstrations by Islamist groups such as the now-banned Islamic Defenders’ Front (*Front Pembela Islam* or FPI) quickly took a racist, anti-Chinese tone which was also reflected in the public sphere and on social media.⁶¹ The case made Chinese Indonesians justifiably worried about potential *pribumi* backlash against ethnic Chinese generally. As Henri, an elder of the Batam Chinese community, remarked, the Ahok case could potentially cause the *pribumi* to regret allowing the post-1998 political freedoms granted to Chinese:

Ahok is an example of what happens when you get over-confident. Like us [Riau Islands Chinese], Ahok also came from the Islands although he's from Belitung [in neighbouring Batam and Belitung province], and he started off in local politics as a Regent. But then he got too ambitious and wanted to make it big in national politics. For what, I ask you? Look at what is happening now ... He would have been better off if he had focused on his home turf of Bangka-Belitung, maybe even be the Governor there ... The Chinese are a minority in this country, and we need to be realistic. A Chinese cannot just go around saying that they want to be a President like Ahok did, the *pribumi* will not tolerate that.

I found similar sentiments among Riau Islands Chinese elders and politicians who worried that anti-Ahok and anti-Chinese narratives would make their way to the Riau Islands. According to the politicians I spoke to, the way to prevent this anti-Chinese narrative from taking hold in the Islands was by assuring local Malay politicians and leaders that the Chinese will not challenge the Malays' *putera daerah* privilege, and that the Chinese are in politics to assist local development efforts. In the words of Ronald, a Batam politician:

The Riau Islands is different from Jakarta ... What we [Riau Islands Chinese] wanted when Kepri [Riau Islands] became a province was to have a say and to not be silenced or forgotten again. Our ancestors have been part of these Islands for centuries, and this province is our home.

Anti-Chinese sentiments associated with the Ahok case in Jakarta ultimately never had much impact in the Riau Islands. My informants attributed this to the relatively harmonious coexistence between Malays and the Chinese. However, the Ahok case did serve as a reminder that Chinese political participation can be contentious, and that the ethnic Chinese must continue to strategically negotiate their belonging in the Riau Islands.

Conclusion

During a visit to Karimun Island, I walked around Tanjung Balai's residential backstreets one night after a seafood dinner with two Chinese informants, Alung and Fenny. Alung pointed at a few well-kept, medium-sized houses and said, 'those houses belong to Singaporean Chinese men who keep their mistresses here'. In their account, there were different 'classes' of mistresses in the Islands, with richer Singaporeans keeping households in Batam, while the less wealthy opted for cheaper Bintan or Karimun. Some mistresses were Malay or Javanese, but the majority, they told me, were Chinese. When I inquired about why they thought the women agreed to be mistresses of Singaporean Chinese men, Alung said, 'the Singaporean men are rich, the women get visited often because Singapore is so close, and they have the same language and religion, so why not?' Both Alung and Fenny then reminded me that the practice of maintaining (often multiple) families across the different Islands of the Riau Archipelago is centuries old.

In the Riau Islands, the history and continuing importance of inter-Island networks and connectivities are evident everywhere. Since the fall of the New Order, these archipelagic connections have only become stronger, particularly in the cultural realm as restrictions against public displays of Chinese culture and languages have been eased. For instance, as Stenberg has documented, in recent years, Singaporean Chinese opera troupes have frequently visited the Riau Islands for large-scale performances. Citing contemporary reports, Stenberg notes how Singaporean troupes such as the amateur Macpherson Teochew Opera Group and the Opera Institute have performed at venues such as the Xuantian Shangdi temple in Tanjung Pinang. There, a 2003 multi-day show reported audiences of up to two thousand for each of the three nights, among them around two hundred Singaporeans who made a special trip to see the performances.⁶² Stenberg also points out that at least one of the Singaporean performers was herself Indonesia-born and expressed satisfaction at 'returning home' to perform.⁶³

Archipelagic ties continue even in death, with the spirit tablets (a wooden placard on which the name of a deceased ancestor is inscribed) of many deceased Singaporean Chinese stored in temples and clan ancestral houses all over the Riau Islands. For instance, at the Vihara Buddha Diepa temple in Tanjung Balai, the elderly temple keeper remarked that many of the spirit tablets on display belong Chinese Singaporeans who were either born in Karimun or whose families originated from the Island. My guide Adi, who is also a clan association elder in Karimun, explained:

The Chinese have a belief that, when you die, your spirit tablet should be displayed on the altar with the rest of your clan so you can be honoured by your descendants. Many Chinese Singaporeans came from here [Riau Islands], and their ancestral temples are here too, so when they died, their spirit tablets were brought here, and of course we accepted them.

The transnational spirit tablets serve as a touching reminder of the resilience of archipelagic connectivities in the Riau Islands that have survived not only the assimilation period under New Order, but also centuries of changing political fortunes and shifting boundaries.

In this paper, I have shown how, throughout the assimilation period, the long-standing archipelagic connections between the Riau Islands Chinese and Singapore played a very important part in the maintenance of Chinese languages and cultures in the Islands. Their business/social/cultural networks with Chinese Singaporeans made the Riau Islands Chinese a provincial asset from the 1980s onwards, when Batam was developed as a special industrial zone requiring foreign capital. Over the decades, the Riau Islands Chinese have managed to capitalise on their position as cultural and economic brokers with vast transnational networks across the strategically located Riau Archipelago. At the same time, their focus has been to maintain their local belonging, and this has been evident in their political activities following the Riau Islands' establishment as an independent province in 2004.

This ethnographic study of the translocal belonging of the Riau Islands Chinese has important theoretical implications for the study of ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, and for the literature on borderland communities more broadly. So far, most studies on modern ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia have been dominated by conventional state-centric modes of analyses that have sought to establish how well the Chinese 'fit' within the ethno-nationalist modes of belonging of their respective 'host' countries. This is certainly true in the study of the Chinese in Indonesia, where the prevalent framework of analysis has been the assimilation versus integration debate that places ethnic Chinese communities on a spectrum that determines degrees of belonging to the Indonesian nation. I suggest that viewing the Riau Islands Chinese as a translocal borderland community is a much more useful way to understand why and how they have been able to maintain their relatively mobile and independent way of life for so long.

The Riau Islands Chinese represent an anomaly in the study of ethnic Chinese communities in Indonesia. Their identity is one that is rooted in their archipelagic history, and the translocal/transnational nature of their contemporary circulations and belonging reveals the limits of conceptualising Chinese Indonesian experiences solely in terms of their (un)belonging in the Indonesian nation state. Their history and contemporary realities call for a rethinking of how the ideological and judicial impositions of the nation state(s) are negotiated in processes of Chinese identity formation at the local level. By extension, this study of Riau Islands Chinese also sheds light on how other ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia may be analysed based on their contemporary translocal/transnational circulations.

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Notes

1. In this article, I use the term 'Riau Archipelago' to refer to the group of Islands that historically included maritime regions now part of the contemporary Riau Islands Province in Indonesia, Singapore, the southern tip of the Malaysian peninsula, and Islands and river deltas on the east coast of mainland Sumatra's Riau province. I use the term 'Riau Islands' when I refer specifically to the group of Islands that are now part of Indonesia's Riau Islands province.
2. This is the figure from the 2010 National Census. A more recent national population census was conducted in 2020, but the results have yet to be published at the time of writing. See Badan Pusat Statistik, "The 2010 Indonesia Population Census."
3. Lyons and Ford, "The Chinese of Karimun."
4. Similar to Riau Islands towns like Batam and Tanjung Pinang, the towns of Bagansiapiapi in mainland Riau and Pontianak and Singkawang in West Kalimantan all have thriving ethnic Chinese communities that retained their Chinese culture and language abilities throughout the New Order. Scholars have attributed this cultural maintenance to factors such as population concentration, their relatively isolated locations away from Java, and their long history of local integration in the area. However, I argue that the case of the Riau Islands Chinese is unique due to their strategic maritime borderland location near Singapore. For more on the Chinese communities in West Kalimantan, see Hui, *Strangers at Home: History and Subjectivity among the Chinese Communities of West Kalimantan, Indonesia*; Heidhues, *Golddiggers, Farmers,*

and Traders in the 'Chinese Districts' of West Kalimantan, Indonesia. For a broader analysis of the population spread of ethnic Chinese in contemporary Indonesia, see Arifin, Hasbullah, and Pramono, "Chinese Indonesians."

5. See for example Coppel, *Indonesian Chinese in Crisis*; Suryadinata, *Pribumi Indonesians, the Chinese Minority, and China*; Turner, "Speaking Out"; Hoon, "Assimilation, Multiculturalism, Hybridity." In recent studies however, some studies on Chinese Indonesians have attempted to break away from this state-centric approach; for example, see Hoon, "Between Hybridity and Identity."
6. Ng, *The Chinese in Riau*.
7. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 178.
8. *Ibid.*, 180.
9. Smith and Guarnizo, "The Locations of Transnationalism,"; Velayutham and Wise, "Moral Economies of a Translocal Village"; Greiner and Sakdapolrak, "Translocality."
10. Appadurai, "The Production of Locality."
11. Greiner and Sakdapolrak, "Translocality," 373.
12. Appadurai, *The Production of Locality*; Vertovec, *Transnationalism*.
13. For more on the discussion on the difference between transnationalism and translocality as concepts, see Conradson and McKay, "Translocal Subjectivities."
14. For instance, in her study of the Akha people in the Thai, Chinese, and Burmese borderlands who are frequently identified as Chinese, Mika Toyota argues that Akha Chinese identity is rooted in their experiences of mobility across borderlands. Toyota terms this simultaneous local/transnational belonging 'trans-localized Chinese identity.' See Toyota, "Contested Chinese Identities."
15. Andaya, "Seas, Oceans and Cosmologies in Southeast Asia."
16. Long, *Being Malay in Indonesia*.
17. Trocki, *Prince of the Pirates, 1784–1885*, 33–34.
18. Vos, *Gentle Janus, Merchant Prince*, 157, 149.
19. van der Putten, "A Malay of Bugis Ancestry."
20. Tagliacozzo, "Tropical Spaces, Frozen Frontiers."
21. Ng, *The Chinese in Riau: A Community on an Unstable and Restrictive Frontier*, 51.
22. *Ibid.*; Tagliacozzo, "Tropical Spaces, Frozen Frontiers."
23. Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865–1915*; Thung and Masnun, "Melayu-Riau: Dari Isu 'Riau Merdeka' Sampai Persoalan Riau Kepulauan,"; Wee, "Ethno-Nationalism in Process."
24. See note 6 above.
25. "Major Wee Boon Teng & Mme. Soh Gim Neo Golden Wedding." See also Goh "Majoor" Wee Boon Teng (Bukit Brown)."
26. "Death – Wee Boon Teng."
27. Historian Sai Siew-Min's work on Nanyang Chinese diasporic imaginary discusses the early 20th century circulations of Chinese teachers (both from China and from Southeast Asian Chinese settlements) among Chinese schools in the Strait of Malacca and the Dutch East Indies. See Sai, "The Nanyang Diasporic Imaginary." See also Sai, "Pugilists from the Mountains."

28. For instance, citing contemporary news sources, Josh Stenberg notes how Chinese performance troupes from Singapore toured ethnic Chinese communities in Indonesia (including the Riau Islands) all the way up to the 1960s, representing an important source of income for Singaporean troupes. See Stenberg, *Minority Stages: Sino-Indonesian Performance and Public Display*.
29. Andaya, "Recreating a Vision."
30. Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution*.
31. See above 21., 50.
32. All research participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their privacy.
33. See above 24.
34. Boellstorff, "Ethnolocality."
35. Guinness, *Indonesia's New Order*, 271.
36. For instance, at *Taman Mini Indonesia Indah* (Beautiful Indonesia in Miniature Park), a New Order-era national open-air museum of ethnography that features replicas of each province's vernacular architecture and cultural displays, the exhibit on Riau province features various styles of Riau Malay houses with *limas* and *lipat kajang* roofs, as well as displays of Malay traditional dress and replicas of texts such as *Gurindam Dua Belas* (The Twelve Aphorisms) by Riau Islands Malay poet Raja Ali Haji. Even today, there is no representation of Riau Chinese or other Riau migrant cultures in the exhibit.
37. Fee, "The Construction of Malay Identity."
38. See note 3 above.
39. Lyons and Ford point out that the lack of schooling among poorer Chinese communities also affected their fluency in the Indonesian language. Lyons and Ford, "The Chinese of Karimun."
40. Indonesia's immigration regime for ASEAN passport holders means that Singaporeans can enter Indonesia without a visa and stay for up to 30 days on a tourist pass, and Singapore reciprocates. Passing through the immigration checkpoints on either side of the border is a matter of minutes.
41. Ford and Lyons, "The Illegal as Mundane."
42. Putra, Patria, and Haris, *The Tiger from Archipelago*.
43. Ibid.
44. Ford and Lyons, "The Illegal as Mundane," 31.
45. Ford and Lyons, "The Illegal as Mundane." See also Ford and Lyons, "Smuggling Cultures in the Indonesia-Singapore Borderlands."
46. See above 38.
47. Choi, "Local Elections and Democracy in Indonesia."
48. Faucher, "Contesting Boundaries in the Riau Archipelago." For an example of an advertorial focusing on a resort in Bintan (owned by Tanjung Pinang Chinese Bobby Jayanto, discussed earlier in the paper) in the 1980s, see Holmberg, "Winding Down in a Small Town."
49. For instance, according to Freek Colombijn, by 2003, there were at least 5,000 prostitutes active in Batam at any given time, with many of them trafficked there from other parts of Indonesia against their will. Johan Lindquist notes that the average tourist stay on Batam is 1.3 days, which constitutes the typical length for a (often wild) weekend away from tightly policed Singapore. See Colombijn, "Singapore's Expansion to Riau,"; Lindquist, *The Anxieties of Mobility*.

50. Lyons and Ford, “Love, Sex and the Spaces in-Between.”
51. See note 16 above.
52. The Karimun Chinese respondents in Lyons and Ford’s 2013 study had similar memories of the local situation during the May 1998 riots. See Lyons and Ford, “The Chinese of Karimun.” For an *International Herald Tribune* report on Chinese Indonesians from Jakarta that fled to places such as Batam during May 1998, see Fuller, “At Jakarta’s Airport, Planes Arrive Empty and Leave Packed.”
53. See note 13 above.
54. Conradson and McKay, “Translocal Subjectivities.”
55. Setijadi, “Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia,”; Hoon, *Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia*.
56. Aspinall and Fealy, “Introduction: Decentralisation, Democratisation, and the Rise of the Local,”; Hadiz, “Decentralization and Democracy in Indonesia,”; van Klinken, *Communal Violence and Democratization in Indonesia*.
57. Kleden, “Globalisation and the Nation-State.”
58. Malays, and particularly aristocrats, have enjoyed this privilege since the 1950s as an unofficial but socially coded tradition, except in cases when the higher posts are filled by Javanese bureaucrats appointed by Jakarta during the New Order. For more on this topic, see Wee, “Melayu: Hierarchies of Being in Riau.”
59. In Indonesia, there are two levels of Regional People’s Representative Council (DPRD): the provincial level (DPRD *provinsi*), and the district/town level (DPRD *kabupaten/kota*)
60. The ethnic composition of Representatives at both DPR and MPR levels reflects the ethnic composition of the Riau Islands, except for the Javanese. For instance, in the 2019-2024 term, Riau Islands’ four seats at the DPR are occupied by: an ethnic Batak (Sturman Panjaitan), an ethnic Chinese (Cen Sui Lan), a Malay (H. Nyat Kadir), and an ethnic Minang (H. Asman Abnur). Similarly, at the MPR level, the four seats are occupied by: two Malays (Ria Saptarika and H. Dharma Setiawan), an ethnic Chinese (Haripinto Tanuwidjaja), and an ethnic Batak (Richard Hamonangan Pasaribu). My informants considered that this ethnic composition did not happen accidentally, since each major ethnic group ensured that they ran candidates, and voters tended to vote for candidates from their ethnic group to ensure collective representation. Informants also reported uncertainty as to why there were no successful ethnic Javanese candidates in the 2019 elections despite the many Javanese voters in the province. It may be that big parties (e.g. PDI-P, Golkar, Demokrat, Gerindra) did not run Javanese candidates, fearing they would be unpopular with the rest of the electorate.
61. Setijadi, “Ahok’s Downfall and the Rise of Islamist Populism in Indonesia.”
62. Stenberg, *Minority Stage*.
63. *Ibid.*, 44.

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