

BEYOND THE COLONIAL OUTSIDER: CHINESE INDONESIAN PARTICIPATION AND THE MAKING OF INDONESIAN NATIONALISM 1928–1949

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ABSTRACT

*Previous research on Indonesian nationalism has primarily focused on indigenous groups, political leaders, and revolutionaries, often positioning Indonesian Chinese as colonial intermediaries, a minority group, or an exception. This article re-examines the participation of Indonesian Chinese in Indonesian nationalism from the Second Youth Congress in 1928 to the transfer of sovereignty in 1949. Drawing on contemporary print sources, archives, political biographies, constitutional debates, and historical studies, the analysis applies Manuel Castells' theory of identity construction alongside concepts of social boundary formation and national membership. The findings identify three primary forms of Indonesian Chinese participation: the establishment of networks and movement spaces such as Kramat 106; contributions to public discourse through *Sin Po* and the *Partai Tionghoa Indonesia* (Indonesian Chinese Party); and involvement in political and revolutionary activities between 1945 and 1949. The article argues that while Indonesian Chinese challenged their status as outsiders, they continued to face unequal recognition. It advocates for a more inclusive historiography by integrating Indonesian Chinese into the grand narrative of Indonesian nationalism.*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian terdahulu tentang nasionalisme Indonesia berfokus pada kelompok pribumi, para pemimpin politik, dan kaum revolusioner, sehingga kerap menempatkan Tionghoa Indonesia sebagai perantara kolonial, kelompok minoritas, atau pengecualian. Artikel ini menelaah kembali partisipasi Tionghoa Indonesia dalam nasionalisme Indonesia sejak Kongres Pemuda Kedua tahun 1928 hingga penyerahan kedaulatan tahun 1949. Penelitian sejarah yang digunakan memanfaatkan sumber cetak sezaman, arsip, biografi politik, perdebatan konstitusional, dan kajian sejarah, analisis ini menerapkan teori konstruksi identitas Manuel Castells bersama konsep pembentukan batas sosial dan keberanggotaan. Temuan penelitian mengidentifikasi tiga bentuk utama partisipasi Tionghoa Indonesia: pembentukan jaringan dan ruang pergerakan seperti Kramat 106, kontribusi dalam wacana publik melalui Sin Po dan Partai Tionghoa Indonesia, serta keterlibatan dalam aktivitas politik dan revolusioner antara tahun 1945 dan 1949. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa Tionghoa Indonesia menantang status mereka sebagai pihak luar, tetapi tetap menghadapi pengakuan yang tidak setara. Artikel ini mendorong lahirnya historiografi yang lebih inklusif dengan mengintegrasikan Tionghoa Indonesia ke dalam narasi besar nasionalisme Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

The historiography of Indonesian nationalism is commonly organized around the development of indigenous associations, the Youth Pledge of 1928, the proclamation of independence in August 1945, and the Indonesian National Revolution of 1945–1949. Although this framework effectively demonstrates the rearticulation of regional, linguistic, religious, and class differences through the concept of Indonesia, it also perpetuates ethnic divisions inherited from colonial society. Chinese Indonesians are frequently portrayed as commercial intermediaries, legally distinct colonial subjects, victims of violence, or isolated examples of patriotic service. As a result, their participation is often positioned as peripheral rather than integral to the formation of Indonesia (Strassler, 2008).

This marginalization extends beyond the omission of individual names and reflects a deeper historiographical assumption about who is considered a natural bearer of Indonesian nationalism (Kurniawan et al., 2023). The Dutch colonial administration classified most Chinese residents as *Vreemde Oosterlingen* (Foreign Orientals), thereby legally and administratively distinguishing them from both Europeans and the indigenous population (Guo & McFarland, 2023). This categorization imposed a singular institutional identity of qualified foreignness on a highly diverse population, shaping residence, legal jurisdiction, education, political representation (Ravensbergen, 2022) and everyday perceptions of loyalty. Even locally born families deeply embedded in the archipelago were often regarded as socially present but politically external (Yotes, 2024).

Chinese political life was characterized by significant heterogeneity. Variations in birthplace, language, education, class, occupation, religion, generation, and locality produced divergent political orientations (Woolgar, 2023). Some individuals and organizations maintained strong affiliations with China, others sought security and representation within the Dutch colonial framework, while still others contended that the Indies—and increasingly Indonesia—should be regarded as the political homeland of locally born Chinese. These positions were not static and could overlap or shift over time. Consequently, the conventional distinction between *peranakan* and *totok* is analytically valuable only insofar as it does not imply fixed political loyalties (Hoogervorst, 2023).

The period from 1928 to 1949 offers a particularly revealing lens through which to reconsider this diversity. The Second Youth Congress articulated one motherland, one nation, and one language, creating an expansive vocabulary of political unity (Bazzi, 2025). The building at Kramat 106, where the concluding session was held, was connected to a Chinese owner and to an urban environment in which students and activists crossed formal communal boundaries (Darmansyah et al., 2010). Chinese youths were present in networks surrounding the congress. Soon afterwards, the Malay-language Chinese weekly *Sin Po* reproduced the notation and text of Wage Rudolf Supratman's song "Indonesia," extending the reach of a symbol that would later become the national anthem (Mahdiyar, 2023).

The founding of the *Partai Tionghoa Indonesia* (PTI) in 1932 made the political implications of these encounters more explicit. Associated above all with Liem Koen Hian and later Ko Kwat Tjong, the party argued that locally born Chinese should identify their political future with Indonesia rather than treat China or the Netherlands as their primary homeland (Riyadi et al., 2026). This Indonesian-oriented position did not represent all Chinese residents, nor did it erase communal interests. Its significance lay in making a public claim that Chinese descent and Indonesian nationality were compatible categories (Suryadinata, 2022).

The transition from late colonial rule through Japanese occupation to revolution intensified the problem of membership. Independence required the emerging Republic to define citizens, distinguish loyalty from collaboration, mobilise resources, and defend territory (Suwignyo, 2022). Chinese Indonesians responded in varied ways: some joined Republican political and military networks; others supplied transport, finance, medicine, information, or commercial connections; others sought to protect families and livelihoods amid instability. At the same time, anti-Chinese violence and accusations of divided loyalty demonstrated that contribution and recognition were not identical processes (Ubaedillah, 2023).

This article addresses three interrelated questions: How did Chinese Indonesian individuals, organizations, and print networks participate in the making of Indonesian nationalism between 1928 and 1949? In what ways did these actors negotiate the relationship between ethnic identification and Indonesian political belonging? Why did participation not dissolve the symbolic boundary that represented Chinese residents as less naturally Indonesian?

The article contends that Chinese Indonesian participation operated through three interconnected modes. Infrastructural participation provided spaces, resources, and networks that enabled nationalist mobilisation. Discursive participation circulated symbols and political language, articulating Indonesia as a homeland open to people of Chinese descent. Political-revolutionary participation translated these claims into constitutional engagement, logistical support, diplomacy, and military service (Yuliantri & Suwignyo, 2024).

Collectively, these practices demonstrate that Chinese Indonesians were not merely deciding whether to join a nation constructed by others. Specific Chinese actors and institutions contributed to the material, communicative, and political conditions that shaped the nation's imagination and defense. Nevertheless, the outcome was an incomplete transformation of national belonging. The colonial identity of Chinese residents as outsiders was challenged but not fully displaced (Avicena et al., 2024). Indonesian-oriented project identities emerged, and some actors gained recognition, yet ethnicized expectations of loyalty persisted in citizenship debates (Usmi et al., 2025). Revolutionary violence, public memory, and the ongoing distinction between “Chinese” and “indigenous Indonesian.” By distinguishing participation from recognition, this article moves beyond both exclusionary historiography and celebratory recovery. It situates Chinese Indonesian actors within the history of nationalism while acknowledging the conflicts, asymmetries, and conditions that shaped their claims to membership (Heidhues, 2012).

Classical studies of Indonesian nationalism emphasised the organisational and ideological formation of an anti-colonial political community. Nugroho (2020), despite important differences, demonstrate that Indonesia was neither an ancient ethnic unity nor an inevitable state. It emerged through institutions, print, language, political mobilisation, and the reworking of regional identities. Scholarship on youth and popular radicalism similarly shows how schools, boarding houses, associations, newspapers, and urban networks made nationalist communication possible (Lee, 2016). Yet Chinese actors are often tangential to these accounts, appearing mainly where colonial pluralism, commerce, or communal politics intersected with the nationalist movement (Riyadi et al., 2026).

The specialist historiography of Chinese Indonesians provides a different point of entry. Suryadinata's work on Peranakan politics established the importance of distinguishing China-oriented, Dutch-oriented, and Indonesia-oriented currents rather than treating “the Chinese” as a unified bloc (Suryadinata, 2023). Coppel (2008) analysed the recurring political

construction of a “Chinese problem,” while Twang (1987) demonstrated how business elites steered the breakdown of colonial rule and the uncertain transition to sovereignty. Chandra (2012) revealed that the problem of Chinese citizenship was present within the constitutional formation of the Republic itself. These studies make clear that ethnic Chinese political identities were produced within changing relations among colonial institutions, Chinese transnational politics, Indonesian nationalism, and local social pressures.

Recent scholarship has broadened the analysis from formal politics to representation, memory, and everyday belonging. Yuliantri and Suwignyo (2024) revisit ideological negotiations of Indonesian identity during 1900–1942, while Strassler (2008) shows Chinese Indonesians as active participants in the photographic imagining of late-colonial and early postcolonial Indonesia. Tanasaldy (2022) demonstrate that stereotypes of foreignness and conditional acceptance have persisted despite legal and cultural reforms. Chi (2003) analysis of early post-independence Chinese literature highlights the tension between political loyalty and an externally imposed, supposedly permanent Chineseness. Although much of this recent work concerns later periods, it confirms that exclusion after independence cannot be understood without examining how the national boundary was made during decolonisation.

Two limitations remain in the literature. First, evidence concerning Kramat 106, the Chinese press, the PTI, citizenship debates, and revolutionary service is frequently treated as separate episodes (Suriaman, 2026). This fragmentation obscures the mechanisms connecting material support, political discourse, and claims to national membership. Second, recovery often takes an additive form: neglected Chinese individuals are inserted into an established national narrative without reconsidering how the narrative itself defines political agency. A list of “Chinese contributions” can increase visibility while leaving intact the assumption that Indonesian nationalism was fundamentally created elsewhere.

This article, therefore, treats nationalism as a field of identity construction and boundary negotiation. Its theoretical framework combines Castells’ account of legitimising, resistance, and project identities with scholarship on ethnic boundary-making and the politics of belonging. For Castells (2010), identity is a process through which social actors construct meaning by prioritising selected cultural attributes. Identities are neither natural essences nor merely individual choices. They are formed under historically specific relations of power and may be institutionalised, resisted, or redirected towards social transformation.

A legitimising identity is introduced by dominant institutions to rationalise and reproduce an established order. The colonial classification of Chinese residents as Foreign Orientals functioned in this way. It converted heterogeneous histories and attachments into an administratively legible population positioned between Europeans and indigenous peoples (Manse, 2024). The category of regulated rights also generated a political common sense: Chinese residents could be viewed as useful to colonial society without being accepted as members of the indigenous political community.

Resistance identity is constructed by actors occupying devalued or stigmatised positions. Chinese schools, press institutions, associations, and commercial networks created arenas in which discrimination could be criticised, communal dignity could be defended, and alternative futures could be debated. Resistance did not necessarily lead to Indonesian nationalism. It could reinforce attachment to China, demand equality within the colonial system, or protect local Chinese interests. The category is valuable precisely because it prevents the retrospective assumption that all opposition to colonial discrimination was already oriented toward Indonesia.

Project identity emerges when actors use available cultural and organisational resources to redefine their social position and propose a transformed political order. The Indonesia-oriented arguments of the PTI are a clear example. They did not simply request improved treatment for a minority inside the colonial hierarchy. They redefined locally born Chinese as participants in an Indonesian homeland and, in doing so, advanced a more inclusive conception of Indonesia (Arpanudin et al., 2025). Project identity thus worked in two directions: it reconstructed the political meaning of Chineseness and contested the notion of ancestry as the sole basis of national authenticity.

Castells' categories are used here as analytical forms, not as a linear developmental sequence. Different identities coexisted within Chinese communities and sometimes within the same institution. Sin Po, for example, is widely associated with Chinese nationalism, yet its publication of "Indonesia" also enabled the circulation of an Indonesian nationalist symbol. Such evidence is best understood as a boundary-crossing practice rather than proof of a complete ideological conversion.

Boundary theory shifts attention from the cultural content attributed to ethnic groups to the processes by which distinctions between members and non-members become socially consequential (Barth, 1998). Lamont and Molnár (2002) distinguish symbolic boundaries—conceptual distinctions between "us" and "them"—from social boundaries that generate unequal access to rights, institutions, status, and resources. Brubaker (2004) and Wimmer (2013) further show that ethnicity becomes politically powerful through categorisation, networks, institutional incentives, and struggles over classification.

This perspective is crucial for Indonesian nationalism. The declaration of one homeland, nation, and language was formally capacious, but the social interpretation of "Indonesian" could remain associated with indigeneity. Colonial law created a social boundary around the category of 'Foreign Oriental'. Nationalist and postcolonial discourse could reject colonial authority while retaining a symbolic distinction between the authentic indigenous owner of the nation and the Chinese person whose loyalty required demonstration.

Yuval-Davis (2011) distinguishes belonging from the politics of belonging. Belonging concerns attachment, identification, social location, and the experience of being at home. The politics of belonging concerns the authority to decide who belongs, the criteria by which membership is judged, and the power to recognise or reject a claim. Chinese Indonesians could regard Indonesia as their homeland, publish nationalist symbols, join political organisations, or serve the Republic, but self-identification alone could not guarantee recognition by state institutions or wider society.

The combined framework conceptualises Chinese Indonesian participation through three linked processes. Institutional classification imposed an outsider identity. Collective identity construction enabled Chinese actors to accept, resist, or transform that position. Boundary negotiation determined whether Indonesia-oriented claims were acknowledged, contested, or made conditional. Within this framework, infrastructural, discursive, and political-revolutionary participation are not merely categories of contribution. They are mechanisms through which the boundaries of national agency and membership were tested.

Table 1. Analytical Framework and Empirical Indicators

Dimension	Identity Type	Description and analytical focus
Colonial classification	Legitimising identity	Foreign Oriental status; legal and administrative differentiation; narratives of foreignness
Communal organisation	Resistance identity	Press, schools, associations, critiques of discrimination, defence of communal interests
Indonesia-oriented redefinition	Project identity	Indonesia as homeland; PTI programmes; participation in nationalist institutions
National inclusion/exclusion	Boundary-making	Use of Chinese/native/Indonesian categories; membership rules; conditional recognition
Claims to membership	National belonging	Attachment, citizenship claims, responsibility, sacrifice, and service to the Republic
Retrospective recognition	Politics of belonging	Museums, textbooks, biographies, hero designations, and selective omission

Source: Research Results (2025)

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive historical design. Rather than attempting a comprehensive prosopography of Chinese participation, it seeks to explain how selected actors and institutions illuminate broader mechanisms of nation-making. The analysis covers the period from the Second Youth Congress in 1928, which marked a significant symbolic articulation of Indonesian unity, to the transfer of sovereignty in 1949, which concluded the principal phase of the revolution (Suryadinata, 2022).

The evidentiary base consists of four groups of material. First, the article uses contemporary print evidence, especially the facsimile of *Sin Po Wekelijksche-Editie* no. 293, dated 10 November 1928, which printed the notation and text of “Indonesia” (Hoogervorst, 2021). Second, it draws on published institutional and historical records concerning Kramat 106, the Youth Congress, and the urban youth movement (Sudarmanto, 2007). Third, it examines political histories and biographies relating to Liem Koen Hian, Ko Kwat Tiong, the PTI, constitutional debates, and revolutionary participants such as John Lie. Fourth, it triangulates these materials with scholarship on Indonesian nationalism, Chinese Indonesian politics, citizenship, anti-Chinese violence, and national memory (Vickers, 2023).

Sources were selected based on three criteria: documentation of material or organizational contributions to nationalist activity; articulation or circulation of claims regarding Indonesia as homeland, citizenship, or political community; or evidence of how Chinese claims to membership were recognized, contested, or retrospectively remembered. The evidentiary base comprises materials in Indonesian, Malay, Dutch, and English (Bahar et al., 1995). Chinese-language sources were not systematically included due to the limited availability and accessibility of relevant newspapers and institutional records from the period under study. Consequently, the analysis may not fully capture perspectives expressed exclusively in Chinese-language media or internal communications. Materials focused solely on post-1998 identity were used solely to contextualize the longer genealogy of belonging and exclusion, rather than as evidence of events between 1928 and 1949 (Adam, 2024).

The study applies external and internal source criticism. External criticism concerns provenance, date, authorship, publication format, and institutional location. Internal criticism assesses intended audience, political orientation, retrospective reconstruction, and

the distinction between an event and its later commemoration. Newspaper evidence is not treated as a transparent expression of communal opinion. The publication of a nationalist symbol in *Sin Po*, for example, is analysed in relation to the paper's heterogeneous staff, readership, commercial position, and broader Chinese-nationalist reputation. Likewise, later heroic biographies are compared with scholarship on revolutionary institutions and minority-state relations (Gottschalk, 1951).

The analysis proceeded in four stages. A chronological reconstruction distinguished late-colonial youth nationalism, the political realignments of the 1930s, Japanese occupation, and the revolution (Anderson, 2006). The evidence was then coded as infrastructural, discursive, or political-revolutionary participation. A third stage interpreted the evidence through Castells' forms of identity construction. A fourth stage examined the reception of claims to belonging: who could speak as Indonesian, whose participation required ethnic qualification, and which contributions entered national memory (Deng, 2024).

This approach is subject to several limitations. Surviving records tend to privilege public organizations and prominent men, rendering domestic labor, women's participation, informal finance, medical work, and local supply networks less visible. Evidence from Java and national institutions is more readily available than material from other regions. The selected cases do not represent all Chinese communities, whose political responses were diverse and sometimes conflicting. Accordingly, the article advances a mechanism-based interpretation rather than asserting a collective consensus (Tilly, 1995).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The late-colonial Netherlands East Indies was organised through a differentiated legal order. European, indigenous, and Foreign Oriental categories structured jurisdiction, education, political access, residence, and social interaction (Meer, 2024). The classification of Chinese residents as Foreign Orientals created both a legal status and a public representation of separateness. It made ethnic differences administratively durable and encouraged the assumption that Chinese communities had external loyalties, even when many individuals were locally born and Malay-speaking (Thio & Sidarto, 2024).

The social effects of this system were uneven. Chinese residents occupied a range of economic positions, from labourers and petty traders to professionals and commercial elites. Their institutions included schools, temples, churches, newspapers, chambers of commerce, clan organisations, and political associations. These networks provided resources for community formation but also connected Chinese actors to indigenous journalists, urban students, colonial officials, and transnational movements (Eng, 2020).

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, three broad, though overlapping, political horizons had become visible among Chinese communities in the Netherlands East Indies. China-oriented currents, associated particularly with the *Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan* and the *Sin Po* milieu, regarded Chinese cultural renewal, Chinese-language education, and political developments in China as central to overseas Chinese identity (Chin, 2021).

Dutch-oriented elites sought representation, legal protection, and educational opportunity through colonial institutions. Indonesia-oriented activists increasingly argued that local birth, residence, and shared political destiny made the Indies their homeland. These were neither sealed blocs nor simple reflections of *peranakan* and *totok* status. Individuals could shift positions as Japanese expansion, colonial repression, economic crisis, and Indonesian mobilisation altered the political environment (Visscher, 2002).

Indonesian nationalism itself was changing. Youth organisations initially formed around regional and ethnic affiliations, but urban education and associational life generated cross-regional vocabularies. Boarding houses, meeting halls, print shops, schools, and cafés enabled interactions that formal organisational histories do not always capture. The 1928 Youth Congress was therefore both a political event and the visible outcome of an urban communications infrastructure (Anderson, 1983).

Japanese occupation from 1942 disrupted all established orientations. Chinese organisations and publications faced restrictions, partly shaped by Japan's war against China, while Indonesian leaders were drawn into new administrative and mass-mobilisation structures. The collapse of Japanese rule in August 1945 created a political opening but also profound insecurity. The Republic had to convert a nationalist claim into institutions, citizens, armed forces, and territorial authority. Under these conditions, Chinese identity became a site of competing demands: attachment to Indonesia could be enacted through service, but communal vulnerability and inherited suspicion remained powerful (Reid, 2001; Twang, 1998).

Against this backdrop of historical shifts and identity politics, researchers have uncovered several compelling findings: Firstly, Infrastructural participation. Kramat 106 and the social architecture of youth nationalism. The first mode of participation was infrastructural. National movements depend not only on leaders and declarations but also on premises, accommodation, printing, finance, transport, and relations of trust. Kramat 106 illustrates this less visible architecture. The building became a boarding house and meeting place for students and youth activists and hosted the concluding session of the Second Youth Congress. Historical and institutional accounts identify the property with Sie Kong Lian (also rendered in later sources as Sie Kong Liong), a Chinese owner whose building was embedded in the associational life of Batavia's student community (Angkasa, 2024; Darmansyah et al., 2010).

The analytical significance of ownership should be stated carefully. It does not prove that Sie Kong Lian designed the congress, nor that Chinese residents collectively supported the Youth Pledge. It demonstrates something more historically useful: the material geography of nationalism did not map neatly onto colonial racial categories. A space associated with a Chinese owner became part of the infrastructure through which young activists debated and declared an Indonesian nation (Maghfur et al., 2023).

The building's function as a boarding house is equally important. Student residences enabled repeated interaction outside formal congress sessions. They provided settings for rehearsals, organisational meetings, writing, and political conversation. Such spaces helped convert episodic encounters into durable networks. The nation was imagined in speeches, but it was also assembled through rent, hospitality, proximity, and the everyday use of urban property (Maghfur et al., 2023).

Accounts of the congress also identify Chinese youths, including Kwee Thiam Hong and others, within the wider networks of participants and observers (Hoogervorst, 2021). Their presence does not establish a unified Chinese youth position. It does, however, weaken an ethnically sealed interpretation of the Congress. The formal organisations represented in 1928 were still largely structured by regional and communal identities, yet the social field around them could be more permeable (Yahya, 2002).

Through Castells' framework, participation in this milieu challenged the legitimising identity of the Foreign Oriental. Chinese actors entering Indonesian youth spaces behaved in ways not anticipated by a colonial category that presumed political separation. Through a

boundary-making lens, Kramat 106 reveals that practical cooperation sometimes preceded generalised recognition. The social boundary was crossed in the organisation of nationalist activity, even though later public memory often returned the congress to an overwhelmingly indigenous frame (Fasseur, 1994).

Secondly, Discursive participation: Sin Po and the circulation of a national symbol. The second mode of participation was discursive. On 10 November 1928, Sin Po *Wekelijksche-Editie* no. 293 published the notation and text of Wage Rudolf Supratman's song under the title "Indonesia." The item connected the song to the youth congress held on 28 October. Reproduction in print transformed a performance heard by a limited audience into a portable, repeatable symbol (Abas, 1987).

This episode matters because national symbols acquire political force through circulation. A melody performed at a congress becomes national not only because of its content, but because it can be printed, copied, rehearsed, discussed, and attached to collective memory. Sin Po's printing facilities, editorial decisions, commercial distribution, and readership therefore participated in the communicative construction of Indonesia (Putra et al., 2020).

The evidence should not be simplified into the claim that Sin Po had become an Indonesian nationalist newspaper. Historically, the paper has been closely associated with Chinese nationalism and criticism of Dutch-oriented Chinese elites. Its political identity was complex, and its readership contained divergent attachments. The publication is therefore most revealing as a moment of discursive crossing. A Chinese-oriented institution became a vehicle for a symbol that imagined a political community larger than the Chinese communal sphere (Beech, 2026).

This complexity strengthens rather than weakens the argument. If the press were classified only according to a fixed communal ideology, the publication of "Indonesia" would appear anomalous. Treated as an institution embedded in multilingual urban networks, it becomes evident that nationalist discourse moved through channels whose identities could not be reduced to a single political orientation. Journalists, composers, editors, printers, and readers participated in overlapping publics (Blommaert et al., 2005).

Discursive participation also involved terminology. The very use and circulation of "Indonesia" helped normalise a name that challenged colonial geographical and racial vocabularies. Print did not erase Chinese identification; it created a medium in which Chineseness, Malay-language journalism, anti-colonial sentiment, and Indonesian symbolism could coexist. In Castells' terms, a communal institution associated with resistance identity could support practices contributing to project identity. In boundary terms, the publication widened the public through which Indonesian membership could be imagined (Deng, 2024).

Thirdly, Political reorientation: the Partai Tionghoa Indonesia and Indonesia as homeland. The establishment of the PTI in Surabaya in 1932 represented the clearest organisational formulation of an Indonesia-oriented Chinese project identity. Liem Koen Hian and his associates argued that the political future of locally born Chinese lay in Indonesia. The position rejected the assumption that descent predetermined nationality and opposed both exclusive orientation towards China and reliance on the colonial state (Suryadinata, 2023).

The PTI's importance lies less in its size than in the political work its argument performs. Colonial classification represented Chinese residents as a distinct foreign population. The PTI redefined local birth and territorial attachment as grounds for political

membership. It asserted that a person could remain socially recognisable as Chinese while treating Indonesia as their homeland and participating in its anti-colonial future (Suryadinata, 2023).

This was a project identity because it sought to transform more than the status of a minority. It proposed a different national order. If Indonesia belonged only to people classified as indigenous, Chinese incorporation could occur only through disappearance, assimilation, or exceptional permission. If Indonesia were a political community constituted through shared fate and anti-colonial commitment, Chinese Indonesians could participate without first erasing their ancestry. The PTI thus attempted to redraw the nation's boundaries (Riyadi et al., 2026).

The project remained contested. China-oriented newspapers and organisations criticised Indonesian alignment, while Dutch-oriented elites viewed colonial representation as a more secure path. Indonesian nationalist allies were not always consistent in accepting Chinese claims. Political collaboration could coexist with economic resentment, cultural stereotyping, or assumptions that Chinese loyalty was provisional. Liem Koen Hian's own changing relationships with Indonesian political figures illustrate that Indonesia-oriented identity was negotiated, not inevitable (Zhou, 2019).

The PTI also demonstrates why history cannot be written as a linear transition from Chinese identity to Indonesian identity (Aryodiguno, 2019). Its members did not simply move from one mutually exclusive box to another. They combined communal experience, anti-colonial critique, and territorial attachment to produce a hybrid political claim. The party made Chineseness politically compatible with Indonesian nationalism, but it could not unilaterally determine whether wider society would accept that compatibility (Buzan, 2025).

Fourthly, Citizenship, revolution, and political-revolutionary participation. The proclamation of independence changed the scale of the problem. Indonesia was no longer only an imagined anti-colonial community; it was a state-making project that required constitutional definitions of membership. Debates surrounding the 1945 Constitution reveal that Chinese citizenship was not an external issue added later to the Republic. It was present at the founding moment, when political leaders considered how descent, residence, and nationality should be related (Chandra, 2012).

These debates exposed the asymmetry between self-identification and recognition. Chinese residents could declare attachment to Indonesia, but state institutions retained the authority to define citizenship (Mubah & Anabarja, 2020). The colonial category of foreignness, therefore, did not disappear with the proclamation. It was translated into questions about who would become a citizen automatically, whose status required legal confirmation, and whether ancestry signalled a potentially divided allegiance (Antons-Sutanto & Antons, 2016).

During the revolution, Chinese Indonesians acted across a wide spectrum. Some supported Republican diplomacy, journalism, medicine, trade, transport, and supply networks. Commercial and transnational connections could be mobilised to move commodities, obtain funds, and sustain the Republic under blockade. Other Chinese residents tried to remain neutral or sought protection from whichever authority controlled their locality. These responses were conditioned by class, geography, political history, and immediate danger (Twang, 1998).

John Lie became the most visible example of direct military and logistical service. He joined the Indonesian naval struggle and participated in maritime operations that connected

the Republic to external supplies. His later career and eventual recognition as a national hero made him a powerful symbol of Chinese Indonesian patriotism. Analytically, however, the emphasis on John Lie carries a risk. When one heroic figure stands for an entire minority's participation, recognition can reproduce exceptionalism: he belongs because his sacrifice is extraordinary, while the community's ordinary membership remains uncertain (Fogg, 2019).

The broader revolutionary context confirms this tension. Chinese communities in Java and elsewhere experienced violence, dispossession, and accusations of collaboration. Heidhues (2012) shows that anti-Chinese violence was not confined to the first chaotic months after the Japanese surrender; it continued in changing forms across the revolutionary period. Retreat, territorial transition, and the association of Chinese economic activity with colonial power could turn local communities into targets.

Violence does not negate Chinese participation, nor should participation be used to minimise violence. Together, they reveal the conditional structure of belonging. Chinese Indonesians could materially support the Republic and still be collectively suspected. Service could confer recognition on particular individuals without dissolving the ethnic category by which the wider population was judged (Walujono, 2014).

The revolution thus generated political-revolutionary participation in two senses. It enabled direct involvement in the establishment and defence of the Republic, and it forced a public test of the national boundary. Chinese actors demonstrated stakeholding through constitutional claims, logistics, and military service. Yet the social interpretation of the nation continued to distinguish between those assumed to belong and those expected to prove belonging.

The same boundary appears in retrospective memory. The Youth Pledge became a foundational national narrative, but the Chinese ownership and cross-ethnic social life of Kramat 106 remained less prominent than the congress's recognised leaders. The publication of "Indonesia" in *Sin Po* was preserved as an artefact but rarely integrated into a broader account of Chinese print participation. The PTI was acknowledged in specialist scholarship while remaining peripheral to popular histories of nationalist parties.

John Lie's commemoration represents both progress and selectivity. Recognition as a national hero publicly affirmed that Chinese descent was compatible with exemplary service to Indonesia. Yet heroic incorporation privileges forms of contribution that fit established narratives of sacrifice, military courage, and state service. Less visible infrastructures—property, printing, transport, finance, translation, or local care—remain harder to commemorate.

National memory is therefore not a neutral record of participation. It is a later arena of boundary-making. Museums, textbooks, biographies, and hero designations decide which actors can represent the nation and whether ethnic identification is treated as incidental, constitutive, or suspicious. The marginality of Chinese participation in dominant narratives cannot be explained solely by a deficient archive. It also reflects the persistence of indigeneity as an implicit measure of national authenticity.

1. From Colonial Outsider to Incomplete Project Identity

The findings demonstrate a contested movement from an institutionally imposed outsider identity towards an Indonesian-oriented project identity. Colonial law did not merely identify difference; it produced a political subject presumed to be separate from indigenous society (Mamdani, 2012). Chinese institutions responded in multiple ways. Some strengthened transnational Chinese attachment, some negotiated within colonial

representation, and some redirected communal resources towards an Indonesian political future (Freedman, 2002).

The Indonesian-oriented transformation was neither total nor linear. Kramat 106, Sin Po, the PTI, constitutional claims, and revolutionary service represent different levels of engagement. A building could support nationalist infrastructure without its owner becoming a party activist. A newspaper could circulate a national symbol while retaining a Chinese-nationalist editorial identity. A political party could articulate Indonesia as the homeland without speaking for all Chinese communities. A naval officer could embody Republican commitment while other Chinese residents faced collective suspicion. The project identity category is useful only when it preserves this variation (Li, 2000).

The concept of an incomplete transformation captures the outcome. Chinese actors redefined their own political identity and contributed to a more inclusive conception of Indonesia. They weakened the colonial assumption that Chinese descent necessarily meant external loyalty. Yet they did not possess equal power to define the national boundary. State institutions, nationalist leaders, local armed groups, and later historians retained greater authority to decide whose belonging was presumed and whose required evidence (Jackson, 2023).

2. Nationalism as Infrastructure and Circulation

The evidence also changes how nationalist agency is conceptualised. Histories organised around congress resolutions, parties, and military commands tend to privilege visible leadership. Infrastructural and discursive approaches reveal forms of agency without which political declarations cannot acquire durability (Ahlborg & Nightingale, 2018).

Kramat 106 shows that nationalism required physical environments. Its importance lies not in transforming property ownership into heroic authorship, but in making the social architecture of mobilisation analytically visible. Housing, meeting space, urban proximity, and networks of trust enabled repeated collaboration. Such infrastructure crossed the racial order before nationalist historiography fully acknowledged that crossing (Cowen, 2020).

Sin Po demonstrates that the national public was produced through circulation. The song “Indonesia” became politically consequential because it moved beyond the Congress. Print converted sound into text and notation, allowing repetition across distance. The newspaper’s complex orientation is therefore central: nationalism spread not only through media already defined as Indonesian, but through institutions located at intersections of communal, commercial, linguistic, and anti-colonial publics (Nugroho, 2020).

This interpretation avoids treating Chinese Indonesians as guests in someone else’s nationalism. Particular Chinese-owned or Chinese-oriented institutions were among the mechanisms through which Indonesian symbols and networks acquired reach. They did not control the nationalist movement, but neither were they external to its production (Blaut, 1986).

3. Participation, Recognition, and the Ethnic Test of Loyalty

Wimmer Argues that boundary-making theory clarifies why contribution did not automatically result in membership (Wimmer, 2013). According to Gat, national participation is an activity; national recognition is a relation of power. An actor can supply resources, publish symbols, join a party, or defend a state, yet still be categorised as a minority whose loyalty is conditional (Gat, 2013).

The ethnic test of loyalty operated asymmetrically. Indigenous political actors could disagree with the Republic, collaborate with occupying powers, or remain passive without making indigenouness itself suspect (Postero, 2017). According to Hoon, Chinese political diversity, by contrast, was frequently interpreted as evidence about the loyalty of the entire ethnic category. The actions of some could be generalised to all, while patriotic service was individualised as exceptional (Hoon, 2011).

This asymmetry helps explain the persistence of the “Chinese problem.” It was not simply a response to what Chinese residents did. It was a structure of categorisation in which Chineseness was made politically explanatory (Chua, 2004). Economic position, transnational family connections, language, or institutional affiliation could be read as signs of distance from the nation. The Republic inherited this structure even as it challenged colonial rule (Booth, 2016).

Yadav said the politics of belonging also explains why formal inclusiveness was insufficient. The Youth Pledge offered a national vocabulary that could transcend region and ethnicity, but its social implementation depended on recognition (Yadav, 2026). According to Suryadinata, the PTI could claim Indonesia as its homeland, but such claims require an audience willing to accept them. Constitutional citizenship could formalise membership, but social boundaries could continue to distinguish legally Indonesian Chinese from culturally “real” Indonesians (Roff, 1980).

4. Beyond Assimilation and Exceptional Heroes

The evidence challenges the view that assimilation is the only model of integration (Laubenthal, 2023). Chinese participation often occurred through institutions that remained visibly Chinese. Sin Po did not need to cease being associated with Chinese readers in order to circulate an Indonesian symbol. The PTI did not require its members to deny their descent to assert territorial nationalism (Riyadi et al., 2026). John Lie’s service was Indonesian, not because his ethnicity disappeared, but because ethnicity did not determine political allegiance.

At the same time, the article rejects celebratory multiculturalism, in which selected contributions claim that the national project was already inclusive. The persistence of violence, legal uncertainty, and selective memory demonstrates that inclusion was uneven. Recovering Chinese actors must therefore be accompanied by an analysis of the institutions that made their membership contestable (Weng, 2023).

This is where the concept of incomplete transformation adds to the literature. It avoids two opposing errors. The first treats Chinese Indonesians as permanent outsiders who merely reacted to an indigenous nationalism (Yotes, 2024). The second treats several examples of participation as evidence that ethnic boundaries had been overcome. Incomplete transformation recognises substantive participation and political innovation while explaining why equal belonging remained unrealised.

5. Historiographical Implications

Integrating Chinese Indonesians into the central history of nationalism changes the object being studied (Riyadi et al., 2026). The question is no longer only how a minority responded to Indonesian nationalism. It becomes a question of how Indonesian nationalism itself was made through interactions among populations differently positioned by colonial rule (Henley, 2021).

This approach also redirects attention from representative identity to relational mechanisms. Sie Kong Lian, Kwee Thiam Hong, Sin Po, Liem Koen Hian, Ko Kwat Tiong, and John Lie should not be made to stand for all Chinese Indonesians. Their value lies in revealing mechanisms: the provision of space, entry into youth networks, the circulation of symbols, the redefinition of homeland, constitutional negotiation, and revolutionary service. According to Kim, these mechanisms can guide further regional and archival research without turning a heterogeneous population into a single political subject (Kim, 2022).

Finally, the analysis connects event history with memory. The latter marginalisation of participation is part of the history of belonging. What a nation remembers about its making shapes who appear to have an original claim upon it. Restoring Chinese Indonesian participation is therefore not an act of adding diversity to a completed narrative. It is a revision of how agency, membership, and national authenticity are historically understood (Februandari, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Chinese-Indonesian participation proves that the construction of Indonesian nationhood is a product of negotiations of space, language, and social boundaries that transcend the boundaries of colonial law. This article has identified three interconnected modes of participation. Infrastructural participation provided spaces and social networks that sustained youth mobilisation. Discursive participation circulated nationalist symbols and articulated Indonesia as a political homeland. Political-revolutionary participation translated those claims into constitutional engagement, logistical support, and military service.

The cases of Kramat 106, Sin Po, the PTI, citizenship debates, and John Lie show that Chinese actors did more than respond to a nation constructed by indigenous elites. Particular individuals and institutions contributed to the material and communicative processes through which Indonesia became imaginable and defensible. Their actions crossed colonial racial boundaries and challenged the legitimising identity of Chinese residents as permanently foreign.

Castells' framework explains how communal institutions formed under conditions of exclusion could support resistance and, in some cases, an Indonesia-oriented project identity. Boundary-making and national-belonging approaches explain why this transformation remained incomplete. Chinese actors could claim Indonesia, participate in its political formation, and risk their lives for the Republic, but recognition depended on institutions and publics that continued to associate authentic nationality with indigeneity.

The resulting national membership was conditional. Patriotic actions were often individualised as exceptional, whereas suspicion could be collectivised across the ethnic category. Legal citizenship could coexist with symbolic foreignness. Later commemoration could honour a national hero while leaving the broader infrastructure of Chinese participation peripheral.

The article, therefore, proposes an incomplete transformation of national belonging as the most appropriate interpretation of the period. The concept acknowledges that Chinese Indonesian actors helped expand the meaning of Indonesia beyond colonial classification, while also accounting for the persistence of unequal power to define who naturally belonged.

Further research should extend this analysis beyond nationally visible male actors. Regional archives, Chinese- and Malay-language newspapers, women's organisations,

medical networks, commercial supply systems, and local revolutionary histories may reveal participation that formal political records overlook. Comparative study of textbooks, museums, and commemorations could also trace how later regimes reconstructed the national boundary.

Chinese Indonesians should not appear as an appendix to Indonesian nationalism. Their participation reveals that the nation was produced through cross-ethnic infrastructures, contested discourses, and unequal struggles for recognition. Indonesia emerged not from a single ethnic community but from a political field in which differently positioned actors attempted to transform colonial categories into a shared—though still unfinished—national belonging.

This research establishes a crucial historical thesis: the political and cultural participation of ethnic Chinese in the dynamics of Indonesian nationhood proves that citizenship membership in this country has historically always been "conditional." The dominant national historical narrative often structurally marginalizes their contributions, placing ethnic Chinese in a perpetual state of ambivalence—recognized when needed, yet suspected when crisis hits. This finding is not merely a correction to the historical record, but a revelation of our citizenship construction that remains vulnerable to exclusive marginalization.

In the perspective of Citizenship Studies, this finding carries fundamental implications for the reorientation of Civic Education (Pendidikan Kewarganegaraan/PKn) in Indonesia. The "incomplete transformation" from the revolutionary era toward an inclusive nation-state visibly leaves thick traces in the praxis of national education. To this day, the teaching of national history, Pancasila, and the doctrine of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) in classrooms is often trapped in infantile and performative interpretations. Diversity values are frequently taught merely as essentialist slogans without dissecting historical wounds and the biases of structural injustice that govern them.

More fundamentally, we must dare to pose a critical question: does our current civics curriculum still inherit the dichotomous bias of "indigenous (*pribumi*) versus non-indigenous (*non-pribumi*)"? Implicitly (via the hidden curriculum), the answer is yes. Although the dichotomy has been legally abolished, our pedagogical logic still preserves the political categorizations of the colonial era. Civic education is still dominated by a nation-centric narrative that positions the "*pribumi*" group as the sole rightful owners of the republic, while the ethnic Chinese group is positioned merely as "accommodated guests." Consequently, the teaching of Pancasila loses its critical edge because it is reduced to a tool for pseudo-harmonization, rather than utilized as an analytical lens to dismantle the racialization of citizenship.

Therefore, Civic Education in Indonesia urgently requires a radical reconceptualization. Civic education must no longer be practiced as an ahistorical indoctrination of singular loyalty; instead, it must transform into Critical Citizenship Education. The national curriculum must discard the biased lens of *pribumi*-centrism, organically integrate the narrative of ethnic Chinese participation—not as a supplementary add-on—and teach *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* not merely as a cultural destiny, but as a commitment to equal political justice for every citizen, without conditions.

DECLARATIONS

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