

Research paper

Social Labeling and Economic Perceptions of Chines-Indonesians in Contemporary

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese ethnic minority has long occupied a distinct position within Indonesian society, shaped by both historical migration patterns and persistent economic stereotypes. For generations, Chinese Indonesians have been widely recognized as skilled traders and entrepreneurs, a perception that has influenced interethnic relations while also reinforcing social distance. While the economic role of Chinese Indonesians is well documented, the broader dimensions of their social integration, cultural exchange, and post-conflict reconciliation remain underexplored. In particular, the shift in interethnic dynamics following the 1998 riots and subsequent reform era has not been fully examined beyond economic narratives. This study aims to examine the factors contributing to the economic success of Chinese traders in Indonesia and to demonstrate how cultural adaptation, economic cooperation, and social interaction collectively reshape interethnic relations beyond traditional business-oriented labeling. The research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach, drawing on literature review and secondary data analysis to assess historical patterns, cultural practices, and post-reform developments in Chinese-Indonesian relations. Findings indicate that the success of Chinese traders is linked to strong business networks, cultural values emphasizing diligence, and adaptability. Beyond commerce, cultural exchange has expanded, with traditions such as Lunar New Year increasingly embraced by the wider community. Economic cooperation has strengthened mutual interdependence, while post-1998 reconciliation efforts have contributed to reduced social distance and greater acceptance. The impact of the 1998 riots marked a turning point, accelerating policy and societal shifts toward inclusion. The study concludes that economic strength, cultural adaptation, and sustained social interaction together foster more positive interethnic relations. These insights contribute to broader understandings of Chinese diaspora studies in Indonesia and offer practical lessons for promoting social cohesion and inclusive development.

Keywords: acceptance, Indonesian Chinese, economy strength, labeling

In history it was agreed that Indonesia had established cooperation with China. The relationship between the ancient Chinese and Indonesian empires began through major kingdoms in Indonesia dates back to the 7th century and possibly before (Wolters, 1999). Indonesia is part of the maritime route of the Silk Road which connects China with India and the Arab world which makes this collaboration known as the silk lane trade. Traditionally, the Indonesian archipelago was translated by ancient Chinese geographers as *Nanyang*, which contained sources of spices such as cloves, steamed, and nutmeg, raw materials such as sandalwood, gold and tin,

as well as exotic dangerous items such as ivory, rhino horn, tiger skin, and bones, exotic birds and colorful feathers (Schelander et al., 2000). While fine silk and ceramics from China were exchanged sought after by the ancient kingdom of Indonesia and this collaboration was well known for the Silk Road trade and currently cooperation is still not only in trade but in all fields including political cooperation (BBC World Service Poll, 2025). And it is acknowledged that up to now, Chinese people in Indonesia are recognized as being very skilled in business and expert in trading. In 2010, the number of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Indonesia reached 53.8 million, spread throughout Indonesia. This large number of SMEs reflects the enormous potential that can be developed and enhanced to contribute more to the nation. SMEs have been able to survive several crises that have hit the country, such as the 1997-1998 economic crisis and the 2008 global economic crisis (BBC World Service Poll, 2025).

While many large companies went bankrupt and laid off employees, SMEs were able to absorb the unemployed and re-employ them (Suryanto et al., 2020). Ethnic Chinese (Chinese) dominate SMEs in Indonesia and are also the cause of their proliferation. Ethnic Chinese have contributed to Indonesia's economic development, and their marketing and human resources are more dominant in several commercial sectors to those of Indonesian SMEs. This is influenced by several factors, including culture, arts, education, heritage, principles, customs, attitudes, orientation, and so on. It would be beneficial if Indonesia learned more from the Chinese, whose trading system is more dominant in several commercial sectors to that of the indigenous Indonesian population. This condition contributed to the expansion of Chinese-Indonesian participation in Indonesia's commercial and SME sectors. However, even so, Indonesian SMEs still cannot compete with Chinese SMEs/traders (Chang Yau, 2013).

Based on the latest data from early 2025, the number of Chinese-Indonesian citizens is estimated to be around 11.2 million or 11.15 million. Global Position: Indonesia is the country with the largest Chinese-Indonesian population in the world, surpassing other Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, which is second. Proportion in the population: this figure represents approximately 4% of Indonesia's total population, which is projected to reach over 283 million by 2025. Indonesia recorded an interesting fact in 2023, becoming the country with the largest population of Chinese descent in the world outside of China. With 11.15 million people, or approximately 4 percent of the total population, Indonesia ranks first on the list of countries with the largest Chinese diaspora. According to data from Goodstats.id, in Southeast Asia, ASEAN countries dominate the list of countries with the largest population of Chinese descent (Aryodiguno, 2019).

Although Chinese-Indonesians constitute only around 1.2%–4% of Indonesia's population according to various demographic estimates, their economic contribution has historically been significant, particularly in trade, retail, manufacturing, banking, and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs). Several major Indonesian business groups, including those operating in the food, property, banking, and manufacturing sectors, were established by Chinese-Indonesian entrepreneurs. Studies by Leo Suryadinata and other scholars indicate that Chinese-Indonesian business networks contributed substantially to employment generation, tax revenues, urban economic growth, and the development of domestic distribution systems during both the colonial and post-independence periods. Their participation in SMEs is also closely connected to Indonesia's economic resilience during periods of crisis, including the 1997–1998 Asian financial crises.

Thailand ranks second with 9.7 percent of the total population, followed by Malaysia in third with 20.1 percent. Singapore, despite its smaller population, has a significant percentage, with 52.4 percent of its total population being of Chinese descent, placing it in fifth place globally. The majority of Indonesians of Chinese descent are descendants of immigrants who arrived in the archipelago decades or even centuries ago. They brought with them unique traditions, culture, and values that are now an integral part of Indonesia's cultural diversity. Furthermore, the Chinese diaspora in Indonesia has a long history, from colonial times to the modern era, and plays a significant role in various sectors, including the economy, arts, and politics (gotvnews, 2025).

This study does not aim to compare Chinese-Indonesians with all indigenous ethnic groups in Indonesia in terms of superiority or inferiority in business. Instead, the study focuses specifically on how Chinese-Indonesians have historically been labeled by wider Indonesian society as being skilled in trade and entrepreneurship, and how this labeling has been socially accepted, negotiated, and reproduced within communal life. The research also examines how historical experiences, economic participation, cultural values, and interethnic interactions contribute to the persistence of this social perception. Indigenous Indonesians are discussed as the broader social context in which these labels are formed and interpreted, rather than as a direct comparison group. Is it because the number of Chinese citizens and their expertise in trading has influenced the increasing number of Chinese citizens in Indonesia, which is increasingly strengthening their economic movement in Indonesia. Chinese-Indonesians are often socially perceived as having stronger business networks and entrepreneurial traditions than some indigenous business communities. Consequently, a longstanding social perception developed in Indonesian society that associates Chinese-Indonesians with commercial expertise and entrepreneurial success. From this, a labeling of the Chinese ethnic group in Indonesia was formed so that it was deeply ingrained and recognized by

the indigenous Indonesian people (Gammeltoft & Tarmidi, 2013). Based on this labeling theory, researchers analyzed the literature and the acceptance of the Chinese ethnic label as recognized by indigenous Indonesians.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The communal life of indigenous Indonesians, particularly concerning the acceptance of labeling characteristics by Chinese Indonesians, is a multifaceted issue that intersects with cultural, social, and ethical dimensions. Understanding this dynamic requires a thorough exploration of various indigenous paradigms and their implications for corporate social responsibility (CSR), information dissemination, and philosophical frameworks.

Xu and Yang (2010) provide a foundational perspective by examining the indigenous characteristics of CSR in China. Their study reveals that while certain dimensions of CSR align with Western concepts, others are uniquely shaped by China's social and cultural contexts. This insight is crucial for understanding how Chinese Indonesians might perceive and engage with communal life, as CSR practices can reflect broader societal values and norms. The divergence in CSR dimensions suggests that Chinese Indonesians may navigate their identity and responsibilities within the communal framework differently than their indigenous counterparts, influenced by their unique cultural heritage.

In a related vein, Baruchson-Arbib et al. (2007) highlight the role of information professionals in serving disadvantaged communities. Their findings emphasize the importance of understanding local contexts and the need for information services that empower rather than merely inform. This perspective is particularly relevant for Chinese Indonesians, who may act as intermediaries in the communal life of indigenous Indonesians. By fostering a deeper understanding of local information needs and promoting social autonomy, Chinese Indonesians can facilitate more effective communication and collaboration within these communities.

Jati (2021) further enriches this discourse by exploring indigenous philosophical perspectives that emphasize relationships, community, and interconnectedness. The concepts of Ubuntu and relational ethics resonate with the communal values found in Indonesian society. For Chinese Indonesians, embracing these philosophical underpinnings could enhance their acceptance of labeling characteristics, as they align with the broader communal ethos that prioritizes collective well-being over individualism. This philosophical framework encourages active participation and co-creation, which are essential for fostering harmonious relationships within diverse communities.

Traditional Chinese values, as articulated by Han and Zhang (2018), also play a pivotal role in shaping the identity and behavior of Chinese Indonesians. The notion of "the oneness of nature and man" reflects a holistic understanding of existence that can facilitate greater empathy and acceptance towards indigenous labeling characteristics. By internalizing these values, Chinese Indonesians may find common ground with indigenous communities, promoting a sense of unity and shared purpose that transcends cultural differences.

Finally, Cao (2003) offers a semiotic interpretation of Chinese lawmaking as a communicative act, emphasizing the role of interaction and interpretation in the legislative process. This perspective can be applied to the communal dynamics between Chinese Indonesians and indigenous communities, suggesting that acceptance of labeling characteristics is not merely a matter of compliance but involves a complex interplay of meanings and interpretations. By engaging in open dialogue and fostering mutual understanding, both groups can navigate the challenges posed by labeling and develop a more inclusive communal identity.

Indigenous Indonesians also possess strong economic and entrepreneurial traditions that vary across ethnic groups and regions. Javanese, Minangkabau, Bugis, Madurese, and Banjar communities, among others, have long histories of trade, migration, and commercial activity. For example, the Minangkabau community is widely recognized for its tradition of *merantau* (migration for economic opportunity), while Bugis traders historically developed maritime trading networks across Southeast Asia. Therefore, business capability in Indonesia is not exclusive to Chinese-Indonesians. However, Chinese-Indonesians became more strongly associated with commerce due to historical concentration in urban trade sectors, colonial economic structures, and intergenerational business continuity.

In conclusion, the portrait of Chinese Indonesians' acceptance of labeling characteristics in the communal life of indigenous Indonesians is shaped by a confluence of cultural, philosophical, and ethical dimensions. By drawing on insights from CSR, information ecology, indigenous philosophies, traditional values, and semiotic interpretations, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of this intricate relationship. This literature review underscores the importance of contextually relevant frameworks that honor the unique identities and experiences of both Chinese Indonesians and indigenous communities.

METHODOLOGY

The method used in this study is descriptive research, as it aims to examine the causes of the success of Chinese traders in Indonesia, so that native Indonesian traders can emulate them. This research uses secondary data, in the form of BPS data and reference books, journals online and internet. The data collection method uses documentation methods and obtains report data that has been published by BPS. This descriptive research includes:

1. Classification of Chinese traders and Indonesian traders;
2. Identifying the causes of Chinese success in business and success in business and the reasons why many Indonesian traders are less successful.
3. Labeling Indonesian Chinese ethnic groups who are experts in business and are recognized for their hereditary status.

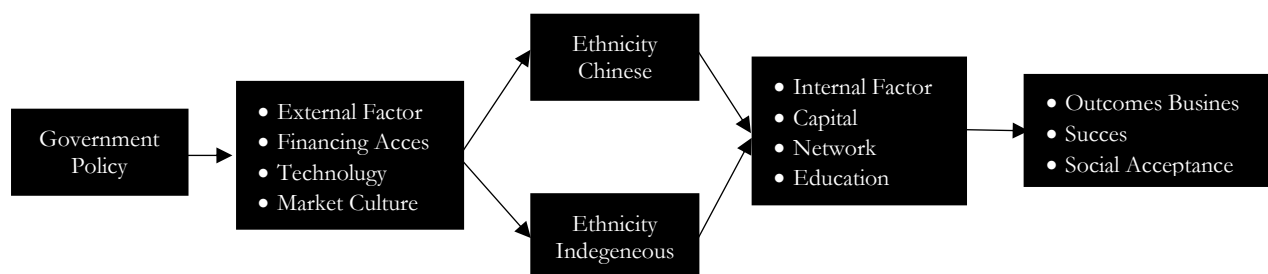
Key Concepts:

1. Ethnicity (Chinese vs. Indigenous) – the identity that becomes the label.
2. Internal Factors – capital, networks (guanxi), education, business experience.
3. External Factors – government policies, access to financing, market culture, technology.
4. Labeling Process – how society labels “Chinese entrepreneurs” and “indigenous entrepreneurs.”
5. Outcomes – level of business success (revenue, growth, innovation) and level of social acceptance.

The conceptual framework illustrates how government policy and external factors interact with ethnic identity and internal factors to produce business outcomes and social acceptance, as shown in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1

Conceptual framework of inter-element relationships in Chinese-Indonesian business success



The analysis of the chart above is described as follows:

1. Government policies influence external factors (e.g., trade regulations). The Indonesian government's policy towards ethnic Chinese has undergone a drastic shift, from the era of discrimination and cultural restrictions during the colonial and New Order eras, to the era of the elimination of discrimination, equal rights, and freedom of expression since the Reformation era.
2. External and ethnic factors together form the internal factors of each group. External factors (such as colonial government policies, modernization, and global dynamics) and the presence of ethnic Chinese (Chinese) have historically intersected with local communities. This dynamic interaction has influenced, shaped, and reconstructed the identities and internal values of various community groups in Indonesia. This dynamic occurred through the following processes:
 - a. Colonial Politics and Policies: During the Dutch colonial period, ethnic Chinese were placed as economic intermediaries through special residential segregation policies and the pass system (wijkenstelsel). This systematic separation limited interaction with the natives, thus creating strong internal group identities and barriers.
 - b. Cultural Assimilation and Acculturation: This cross-cultural encounter gave rise to groups such as the Peranakan Chinese, who absorbed local languages and cultures (e.g., Chinese-Javanese or Benteng Chinese). This process transformed the internal character of the Chinese group itself and influenced local customs.
 - c. Post-Reformation Social Dynamics: The lifting of various restrictions on expression in the reform era opened up a wide space for ethnic Chinese to assimilate, participate in politics, and contribute fully to the social order of Indonesia's multicultural society.
3. The labeling process occurs in society when the two groups interact. The process of labeling (stereotyping) emerged as a direct result of interactions and intersections between indigenous and ethnic Chinese groups. This dynamic was heavily influenced by historical background, economic disparities, and government policies.
 - a. Negative vs. Positive Labeling

In social sciences, labeling does not always refer to bad things, but both create social boundaries (social distance):

Negative Labeling: Ethnic Chinese are often labeled as exclusive, closed, individualistic, or stingy. In contrast, indigenous groups are often labeled as less competitive or lagging behind in the business sector.

Positive Labeling: Ethnic Chinese are often considered very resilient, hardworking, good at trading, and disciplined.

b. Triggering Factors for the Formation of Dutch Colonial

Political Labels: The practice of regional segregation (*wijkenstelsel*) and class division of society during the colonial period deliberately separated indigenous and ethnic Chinese groups so that they would not mix easily, which ultimately triggered social jealousy.

c. Economic Gap: The difference in dominance in the economic sector and traditional markets often gives rise to a sense of competition that strengthens the labeling between the two groups.

d. Obstacles to Assimilation: Differences in language, culture, and religion sometimes make it difficult for the two groups to fully merge, giving rise to suspicion and stereotypes in the public sphere.

4. The end result includes business success and social acceptance (e.g., levels of discrimination or integration).

The success of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia in business is rooted in a colonial history that limited their access to public sector professions. After surviving a period of systematic discrimination under the New Order, they have now achieved full integration, although challenges from stereotypes and occasional discriminatory sentiments still arise within society.

RESULT

Environmentally friendly labeling that has been passed down through generations

The Silk Road was founded as an expansion of trade carried out by Chinese merchants. The Silk Road was a network of ancient land and sea trade routes connecting East and West, stretching from China to the Mediterranean. This network was active from the 2nd century BC to the 15th century and played a vital role in economic, cultural, religious, and technological exchange between civilizations in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Chinese have been in Indonesia for thousands of years through trade and migration routes, even before Indonesia became a nation. The initial wave of arrivals began in the 4th century with Chinese sailors and monks, followed by merchant migrations during the Ming Dynasty (14th century) and labor migration under colonial rule. Their arrivals were generally for trade and a better life, and over time, they settled and integrated with the local population. The difference between China, Cina, and Tionghoa (according to the Indonesian Chinese Social Association): China is the official spelling preferred by the Embassy of the People's Republic of China, meaning it is the official spelling referring to the People's Republic of China. China refers to people who are citizens of China, which is equivalent to Japanese, Malaysian, Singaporean, and Taiwanese. Indonesia refers to foreign citizens. Chinese refers to people of Chinese descent in Indonesia, which is equivalent to Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese, Batak, etc (Kwan, 2008).

The Central Statistics Agency (BPS) does not provide specific data on the number of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia for 2025, as population censuses are not conducted annually. The most recent official BPS data available comes from the 2010 Population Census (SP). Based on BPS data from the 2010 Population Census, the number of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia was approximately 2.83 million, equivalent to approximately 1.2% of Indonesia's total population at that time. For the 2020 Population Census (SP2020), BPS did not record data on ethnicity in as much detail as previous censuses, so there is no updated official data on ethnic Chinese from that census. Although some external sources (such as Statista in 2023) estimate the ethnic Chinese population in Indonesia to be 11.2 million (approximately 4% of the total population), these figures are not official data from BPS. In short, the most recent official BPS data available on the number of ethnic Chinese is from 2010.

Based on the history of Chinese coming to Indonesia through trade routes, it is very natural to label the Chinese ethnic group as "good at trading" or it would be considered strange if there was a Chinese ethnic group that did not trade or did not have a business (Lee, 2025). This labeling has become a hereditary dogma and a stereotype that is difficult to remove for ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. It is said that the Hokkien Chinese people have a philosophy called the 3Cs for success. These 3Cs are: "Cengli," which means that if you want to be successful, your approach must be cengli, or fair (Devanti, 2013). The Chinese people have a philosophy that is highly held and respected because it is the teaching of their ancestors in business and trade. These three philosophies are:

a. Cengli, which means being honest, not cheating, and trustworthy. This principle encourages other people to trust and cooperate with Chinese-Indonesian business actors, thereby expanding commercial networks and long-term business relationships.

- b. Cincai, which means someone who gives easily, is not too calculating, and is not a difficult person. People who give easily also receive easily. Conversely, if they are difficult, stingy, and too calculating with God and others, blessings will be difficult for such people.
- c. Coan, which means that it's natural for people to expect benefits. Like the law of reciprocity, how our quality and contribution can be proportional to what we get (Seng, 1994).

Studies on business communities in Indonesia show that ethnic Chinese groups have historically been prominent in trade and small- to medium-scale enterprises, a position shaped by colonial economic structures (Chua, 2008), strong kinship networks, and adaptive entrepreneurial strategies (Suryadinata, 2017). Several sociological analyses note that this community often maintains tight financial management, family-based business networks, and long-term business orientation, which contribute to their significant role in the commercial sector (Gomez & Hsiao, 2004). In Indonesian social discourse, terms such as *Cindo* or *Citato* occasionally appear as informal labels referring to Indonesian Chinese communities engaged or not engaged in trade; however, these are colloquial cultural expressions rather than academic classifications (Suryadinata, 2017). What is academically documented is that a large proportion of Indonesia's SMEs and trading sectors are operated by individuals of Chinese descent, a pattern linked to historical trading traditions and intergenerational entrepreneurial continuity (Hoon, 2006). Based on data and analysis sourced from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) as well as related reports, the contribution of ethnic Chinese (Chinese) in Indonesia in national development stands out in several main aspects:

1. Demography and Population: Based on the BPS census results, the Chinese are one of the ethnic groups included in the list of the top 20 Indonesian population, with an estimated percentage of around of the total population of Indonesia.
2. Role in the Economy (Industrial and Trade Sector): Historically and current data ethnic Chinese have made a significant contribution to the manufacturing, trade and import industrial sectors. BPS data shows the high involvement of this group in international trade flows, especially imports from China, Japan and the United States. Apart from that, an active role in the processing industrial sector is very crucial in the structure of Indonesia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).
3. Urban Economic Driver: The contribution of ethnic Chinese is highly recognizable in the development of metropolitan, large and medium areas. They are part of an urban development system that balances the economy between regions.
4. Economic Participation: Chinese ethnic groups are often active in the private sector and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which contribute to overall national economic growth.

The situation and nickname for ethnic Chinese in Indonesia is because the majority of small and medium business owners in Indonesia are ethnic Chinese. The latest data on the number of MSMEs in Indonesia is around 65.5 million units in 2025. This figure comes from estimates and data that shows the significant role of MSMEs in the economy, including a contribution to GDP of 61.9% and employment of more than 119 million people or 97% of the total national workforce (Adhinegara, 2020). The life of the people in Indonesia is very heterogeneous, influenced by the customs and culture of each tribe. However, the Chinese people in Indonesia have special characteristics that are seen physically as a means of communication that distinguishes the indigenous Indonesian tribes. The Chinese people in Indonesia do not really show their surnames but Indonesianized names like the Javanese people, for example: Sujoko or the name is based on the area where he lives, as a name adjustment. However, for the younger generation or children, ethnic Chinese prefer western names, such as Nathan, Daniel, Catherine. One example (Figure 2) that can be explained in the photo below is the founders of the Chengho Mosque in Palembang, South Sumatra, Indonesia. They used names that had been adapted to the names of the native population.

Figure 2

The monument of the Founders of the Cheng Ho mosque in Palembang South Sumatra



The conglomerates in Indonesia use Indonesian names even though they have real names and surnames. The founder of PT. Gudang Garam Tbk., the largest cigarette factory in Indonesia, changed his real name or birth name to Surya Wonowidjojo. Not only conglomerates, other Chinese descendants have adapted to choosing names adapted from popular names in Indonesia.

Indonesian conglomerates use Indonesian names for several reasons, including strong local traditions and identities, historical and political influences such as assimilation policies that force the use of Indonesian names, and business strategies to build an image that is closer to Indonesian society and reduces the impression of foreignness. In the past, especially during the New Order era, there were policies that suppressed Chinese ethnic identity, so that many were forced to change their surnames to Indonesianized names to avoid discrimination. Many conglomerates choose to use Indonesian names as a way to honor and demonstrate their cultural identity. These names can reflect a particular family, ethnic, or religious heritage in Indonesia.

The characteristic that ethnic Chinese residents in Indonesia still maintain in acculturating culture and religion is by maintaining the Chengho mosque prayer building in Palembang, South Sumatra. The red color and typical ethnic Chinese ornaments are still maintained and the native population also appreciates them and uses the mosque facilities as a place of collective worship (Figure 3 & Figure 4). They live side by side in harmony regardless of differences. All are equal in diversity and respect each other.

Figure 3

Exterior Facade of the Cheng Ho Mosque, Palembang, South Sumatra



Figure 4

Interior Prayer Hall of the Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang, South Sumatra



Source: Personal documents.

Labeling is a theory that emerged as a result of society's reaction to behavior deemed deviant. A person deemed deviant is then labeled or assigned a label by their social environment. Labeling theory explains deviance, especially when the behavior has reached the stage of secondary deviance. This theory does not attempt to explain why certain individuals are attracted to or involved in deviant behavior, but rather emphasizes the importance of the state's social definitions associated with individual pressures to engage in more deviant behavior (Narwoko & Suyanto, 2010). Chinese Indonesians have long been part of the life of the Indonesian society, starting from two major migrations of Chinese people into South-East Asia [including Indonesia] in the late 13th and early 15th centuries (Lloyd, 2001), following the Admiral Cheng Ho's seven 'legendary' journeys. Difficulties in maintaining contact with faraway China has stimulated assimilation at the local level, but it was only in the mid-16th century, with the arrival of the Dutch and the establishment of Vereenigde Oostindische

Compagnie (VOC), that the Chinese communities developed as “a stable feature of the South-East Asian [and Indonesian] political and economic community” (Lloyd, 2001). Although the first Chinese came as traders, but gradually they have become “a dynamic and multifarious community”. They helped to “maintain links between the harbour kingdoms of North Java and West and South-East Sumatera”, and by the beginning of the 18th century, they had become the “predominant commercial minority” in South-East Asia [and in Indonesia] (Lloyd, 2001).

The stages of ethnic labeling (labelling/stereotypes) in Indonesia often follow complex sociological patterns, starting from physical observation to the formation of social stigma. The following are the stages that generally occur based on a sociological perspective and literature study:

1. **Observation and Categorization (Identification of Characteristics)**
This process begins with observing differences in physical characteristics, language accents, clothing styles, or certain cultural habits that stand out from an ethnic group.
2. **Stereotypes (Generalization of Traits)**
After recognizing the characteristics, people begin to associate these physical or cultural characteristics with certain behavioral traits in an exaggerated or deviant manner. For example, considering ethnicity A "hard", ethnicity B "soft", or ethnicity C "thrifty" absolutely.
3. **Prejudice (Negative/Positive Assessment)**
Generalization of traits (stereotypes) develops into prejudiced attitudes or one-sided judgments, often negative, even before getting to know individuals from the group personally.
4. **Labeling & Stigma**
At this stage, stereotypes become socially recognized labels attached to an ethnic group. In Indonesia, Chinese-Indonesians are frequently labeled as economically strong, disciplined, and skilled in business. Although some labels are positive, others create social distance by portraying the group as exclusive or economically dominant. These labels are reinforced through media narratives, historical experiences, and everyday social interaction.
5. **Discrimination and Social Action**
When labels become institutionalized, they may influence patterns of social treatment. Historically, discriminatory regulations during the colonial and New Order periods limited Chinese cultural expression and contributed to ethnic segregation. Economic jealousy and perceptions of unequal opportunity also occasionally triggered social conflict, including the May 1998 riots.
6. **Integration and Reconstruction of Identity**
Following the Reformasi era, many discriminatory policies were removed, allowing Chinese-Indonesians greater participation in politics, education, and public life. Cultural celebrations such as Lunar New Year became nationally recognized, and younger generations increasingly identify themselves primarily as Indonesians rather than emphasizing ethnic distinctions. This demonstrates a gradual reconstruction of ethnic identity and improved interethnic integration.

In the formation of ethnic labeling in the indigenous environment, it is a positive and recognized labeling. The stages of labeling formation in social interaction, which are rooted in the theory of symbolic interactionism, are generally explained through a process involving several key steps that lead to the formation of stigma. In this research, it is more focused on positive labeling so that it does not turn into a deviant stigma and negative connotation. There are stages of labeling that occur in the Chinese ethnic group in Indonesia, the giving of a label that refers to the energy strength in trading and business.

The main stages of labeling:

1. **Initial Action (Primary Deviation):** The process begins with an individual or group of Indonesian Chinese ethnic groups carrying out an action that is considered different from the prevailing social norms. As explained previously, if a Chinese person does not do business or does not have a shop, it is considered strange by the native people so that Indonesian Chinese are very identical with trading. This action may be unintentional or insignificant at first and is often considered normal behavior by the perpetrator.
 2. **Social Reactions and Implementation of Rules:** Society reacted to these actions. This reaction involved the implementation of rules and effectively "labeling" ethnic Chinese Indonesians.
 3. **Labeling:** These negative labels are formally or informally assigned to ethnic Chinese by society. These labels are not based on actions, but rather on other people's reactions to those actions.
 4. **Changes in Self-Concept:** Individuals who are labeled begin to internalize the label. Their self-concept changes, and they begin to see themselves in the light of the labels others have given them. They may find it difficult to shed the label and begin to act in accordance with the labels they have been given. In this case, ethnic Chinese Indonesians do not object to the labels given to them by indigenous Indonesians. Assimilation through education, cultural celebrations (such as Chinese New Year, which is now a national holiday), and neighborhood life demonstrate a positive integration process.
- Exclusion and Stigma:** As a result of the label,

individuals experience social stigma, discrimination, and exclusion from existing social contacts or relationships (for example, being ostracized by family, friends, or the environment). Sentiments and stereotypes: Until now, the view that ethnic Chinese are exclusive or have excessive control over the economy still sometimes arises in certain circles of society. This happened during the 1998 riots, ethnic Chinese in Indonesia were attacked due to ethnic issues which resulted in an exodus of ethnic Chinese who left Indonesia to escape the 1998 riots. However, things slowly returned to normal, after the 1998 riots, things changed for the better, and relations between indigenous people and ethnic Chinese were harmonious.

5. Secondary Deviation and Deviant Career: Due to the difficulty of returning to normal life and limited access to conventional opportunities, the individual may engage in more serious or repeated deviance. This leads to a "deviant career", where deviance becomes a full-fledged identity and lifestyle for the individual. It is acknowledged that the Chinese ethnic group who are successful in business and become Indonesian conglomerates are on average Chinese ethnic groups. Financial stability is shown in the form of material possessions that are above the average of most indigenous citizens. With extensive networks through trade association groups such as APINDO, Chinese entrepreneurs dominate various sectors, from retail, large-scale manufacturing, to financial conglomerates.

In contrast to traders who come from indigenous communities, especially the Javanese who have the philosophy of "eating or not eating, the important thing is to gather". This form of meaning is ultimately understood in multiple interpretations; even the Javanese who trade do not involve their children in trading. They let their parents struggle, so that their children do not suffer the same struggles as their parents. In contrast to Chinese ethnic groups who accustomed their children to being involved in trade affairs, providing direct examples of how to make money. Character formation from an early age forms a trading mentality from childhood. Managing business and finances by directly involving oneself in business governance. The 5 secrets of Chinese success include the principles of hard work and discipline, frugality and careful financial management, a focus on utility over prestige, the ability to bounce back from failure, and the importance of market research and innovation. Furthermore, significant savings habits and the separation of personal and business funds are other key elements.

1. Hard work and discipline

Hard work: Chinese people are known for their strong work ethic and willingness to work hard.

Discipline: They are very disciplined in maintaining routines and schedules, often starting with waking up early.

2. Thrifty and economical

Frugal lifestyle: Prioritizing frugality, eating at home, and avoiding waste are common habits.

Focus on utility: Buying only what is needed and not being influenced by prestige or showing off luxury.

Avoiding debt: Preferring to save to buy something in cash rather than going into debt.

3. Careful financial management

Separating personal and business funds: Managing business funds separately from personal funds to measure profits and effectively manage business capital.

Saving habits: Setting aside a large portion of income (up to 70-80%) as savings for the future.

4. Strategic thinking in business

Market research: Consistently conducting in-depth market research to identify potential business opportunities.

Competitive advantage: Striving to create a competitive advantage with unique, high-quality products or services.

Customer service: Providing excellent customer service to ensure satisfaction.

Utilizing technology: Open to and actively using technology and innovation for business efficiency.

5. Strong mentality

Not dwelling on failure: Being able to bounce back after failure and learn from it.

Experience as a teacher: Considering experience as the best teacher for learning and growth.

Thinking long-term: Thinking about the next generation, not just yourself.

There are various common ideas about factors often associated with financial and business success in Chinese society. These ideas are often rooted in cultural values and a strong work ethic held within certain communities. It is important to remember that these views are generalizations and labels, and they don't apply to every individual. The diversity of experiences and backgrounds within the Chinese community is immense, and success is influenced by many personal and environmental factors that are unique to each person. Researchers found that research findings The Chinese minority in Indonesia is often perceived as a homogeneous group, when in fact they are a heterogeneous group. Although Chinese-Indonesians are numerically a minority, they remain socially recognizable due to their historical concentration in urban commercial sectors, distinct cultural traditions, and visibility in economic activities. Studies on post-Reformasi Indonesia indicate that Peranakan Chinese

communities have experienced increasing cultural integration through education, language adaptation, interethnic interaction, and participation in national celebrations (Hoon, 2006; Suryadinata, 2017). Nevertheless, remnants of social stereotypes and perceptions of economic dominance continue to influence public attitudes in certain contexts. This conclusion is supported by studies examining ethnic relations, identity politics, and post-1998 social integration in Indonesia. This is because the Indonesian nation is defined narrowly by the state. Only indigenous Indonesians can be accepted as part of the Indonesian nation. In fact, in the past, many indigenous Indonesian leaders argued that the concept of nation was a cultural and political concept, not a racial one. The Chinese, or more commonly known as the Cina, are renowned for their trading skills and have begun to expand into producing goods and services needed by Muslims worldwide, even though the majority of Chinese are non-Muslim (Soenjoto, 2017)

Building trust and unity among Chinese ethnic groups in Indonesia after the 1998 riots

The 1998 riots were a major political disaster in Indonesia and had a significant impact on all aspects of life in Indonesia. The main trigger for the May 1998 riots was the Asian monetary crisis which caused economic difficulties and public distrust of the New Order government, which then peaked after the Trisakti student shooting tragedy on May 12, 1998. In addition, these riots were exacerbated by racial sentiment and tensions between ethnic Chinese and indigenous people, which already existed. Racial sentiment and discrimination: These riots were also triggered by deep racial sentiments, where many shops and companies owned by Chinese citizens were targeted for destruction, looting, and physical and sexual violence (Soenjoto & Mahmudah, 2015).

The riots were characterized by widespread racially motivated acts, ranging from hate speech to brutal physical violence, including vandalism, looting, arson, assault, sexual harassment, and murder. The primary targets of these acts were Chinese-Indonesian citizens, with rioters often using anti-Chinese sentiment to incite the crowd. Symbols of ethnic and religious identity, such as “Indigenous,” “Muslim,” and “Haji,” as well as political slogans like “Pro Reformasi,” were used to identify and target specific groups. Some of the messages conveyed were very explicit, such as banners calling for the burning and destruction of Chinese-Indonesian citizens (Hikmawati, 2017). The riots resulted in significant losses for Chinese-Indonesian businesses, which required varying amounts of time to recover, depending on their financial situation and the extent of damage to their stores. The recovery process, which took between three days and a month, was influenced by financial and security considerations, given the situation was not yet fully stable and the potential for further unrest. Most Chinese-Indonesian businesspeople chose to stay and rebuild their businesses in Jakarta, despite the lack of a comprehensive legal resolution to the human rights violations that followed the riots. They believed that their Chinese-Indonesian identity would remain visible wherever they lived, so moving, aside from business location considerations, would not significantly impact their safety and well-being.

The action taken by Chinese businessmen in restarting their trading businesses from the bottom was by using money from loans or savings during trading. The strong reasons that became the basis for Chinese businessmen to choose to survive were Jakarta's favorable location and the main roads connecting between regions in Jakarta. Confidence in the growing market, accompanied by hard work and tenacity, enabled Chinese businessmen in Jakarta to rebuild and develop their businesses. Until 2003, they had shown significant growth and played an important role in the retail and automotive sectors, proving their resilience and dedication in business despite being victims of the May 1998 riots (Hutahaean, 2014). In the aftermath (Figure 5) of the May 1998 riots targeting Chinese Indonesians, there is evidence of a gradual decline in overt racism and negative stereotypes, manifested in increased political participation and a more rapid process of social integration in certain regions.

Figure 5

Aftermath of the May 1998 Riots in Jakarta



Note. From Jakarta riot, May 1998, by Antara Photo, 1998, May 19. Copyright 1998 by Antara. Reprinted with permission.

Despite the severe trauma and material losses, these shared experiences appear to have, in some contexts, catalyzed community cohesion and mutual engagement. The violence of May 1998 exposed the broader population to the destructive impact of racial prejudice, prompting deeper societal reflection on discrimination against Chinese Indonesians. Over time, such prejudices have begun to soften, in part due to reform-era legal and symbolic changes. One of the most significant indicators of post-riot change is the greater visibility of ethnic Chinese in formal politics. For instance, a young Chinese-Indonesian political voice emerged in the 1999 elections, though structural barriers remained. In specific locales such as Glodok (Jakarta), the trauma of the riots appears to have fostered stronger inter-communal ties. Research on the post-riot period (1998–2001) indicates that negative stereotypes began to weaken, and Chinese-Indonesian communities engaged more deeply with broader society to rebuild and regain a sense of shared fate.

Revocation of Discriminatory Policies: After the *orde baru*, many discriminatory policies that previously restricted the lives of ethnic Chinese (such as the ban on Chinese New Year celebrations in public spaces) were revoked, granting them previously unavailable freedoms.

Social Integration: Although anti-Chinese sentiment had long been entrenched, the events of 1998 sparked public awareness of human rights and the importance of integration. The process of social integration gradually improved, supported by the role of local communities and regional governments in several post-riot areas. In our previous research entitled "Examining The Indonesian Chinese Portrait: Ethnic Chinese Minority in a Muslim-majority Country" there were research findings stating that ethnic Chinese in Indonesia do have the power of economic movement and after the 98 riots, ethnic Chinese began to penetrate the world of politics. The power of economic movement has been proven in the history of China's presence in Indonesia through trade routes.

Historical studies show that economic activities carried out by Chinese Indonesians particularly in trade, distribution networks, and small-to-medium enterprises have significantly shaped perceptions of their business acumen (Suryadinata, 2017). These perceptions, transmitted across generations, contributed to a persistent social labeling of ethnic Chinese as highly skilled in commerce. The relationship between Chinese Indonesians and indigenous communities experienced major tension during the May 1998 riots, which marked one of the most severe episodes of ethnic conflict in Indonesia (Aspinall, 2005). However, subsequent developments indicate a gradual improvement in interethnic relations, supported by stronger state protection, reforms in citizenship and anti-discrimination policies, and broader social recognition that Chinese Indonesians are integral to national development particularly in the economic sector (Hoon, 2006).

FINDINGS

This study found and analyzed that the Chinese ethnic group, also known as the *Tionghoa*, has distinctive characteristics that distinguish it from the indigenous population. As reported by CNN Indonesia on May 18, 2023, there are four races in Indonesia: Asiatic Mongoloid (characterized by yellow skin, narrow eyes, and straight hair), Malayan Mongoloid (characterized by yellowish to black skin), Papuan Melanosoid (characterized by dark skin, thicker lips, and curly, wavy hair), and finally, Weddoid (characterized by brown skin, a small build, and wavy hair). This research is not intended to compare with the other 3 races but to examine the unique characteristics of the Chinese ethnic group who survive and live side by side in harmony in Indonesia. Despite the labeling, the Chinese ethnic group does not feel that this labeling is an obstacle to developing and progressing in Indonesia. Describes the uniqueness of the Chinese ethnic group with its advantages, especially in the field of trade which is recognized by the indigenous people. Becoming a strengthening link between the economic movement of the indigenous people and the Chinese ethnic group.

The findings indicate that the persistence of labeling toward Chinese-Indonesians is closely connected to historical economic roles, intergenerational business practices, and patterns of social interaction within Indonesian society. The study does not argue that Chinese-Indonesians are inherently more successful than indigenous groups. Rather, it demonstrates that social perceptions regarding Chinese-Indonesian entrepreneurship were historically constructed through colonial economic structures, family-based business continuity, strong commercial networks, and repeated social interaction. At the same time, the study also finds that younger generations increasingly reject rigid ethnic stereotypes and emphasize a shared Indonesian national identity.

1. The label "Chinese" or *Tionghoa* remains strong in the eyes of indigenous communities, but many are beginning to see it more as an ethnic identity than simply "foreign."
2. Social acceptance depends on how actively Chinese people participate in community activities (e.g., mutual cooperation, religious events, or local festivals). Those who actively participate usually receive positive labels.
3. Negative stereotypes (e.g., "stingy" or "trifling") still exist, but there are also prominent counter-stereotypes, such as valued economic and cultural contributions.
4. Younger generations are more likely to reject overly rigid labels; they emphasize an inclusive "Indonesian" identity.

Socioeconomic conditions influence acceptance: in areas with high levels of prosperity, ethnic labels tend to be more relaxed, while in areas still struggling, labels can be a source of tension.

IMPLICATION

This study can enrich the understanding of the existence of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia who are increasingly blending like native citizens and add to the treasure trove of insight for future researchers, especially researchers on the study of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that the way society labels Chinese Indonesians has a direct impact on how their economic role is viewed. For decades, the association between Chinese ethnicity and commercial expertise has dominated public perception, often simplifying their identity into a single economic function. Yet contemporary developments show that this narrative is not fixed. The study finds that the aftermath of the 1998 riots and the reform period became a turning point for redefining interethnic dynamics. As cultural practices such as Lunar New Year gain broader public participation and business collaboration across ethnic lines intensifies, the rigid boundaries created by past labeling begin to loosen. Economic interdependence now serves as a bridge rather than a barrier, encouraging mutual recognition beyond stereotypes. Hence, while historical social labels still color economic perceptions of Chinese Indonesians, ongoing cultural integration and joint economic activity are actively reshaping those views. The transformation suggests that inclusive policies and daily social interaction are key to dismantling outdated perceptions. These findings are relevant for scholars of diaspora and ethnicity in Indonesia, and they underline the importance of promoting equitable participation to sustain long-term social cohesion.

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Ethical statement

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach based exclusively on secondary data obtained from published literature, official statistical reports, books, journal articles, and publicly accessible documents. No human participants, personal data, interviews, surveys, or experimental procedures were involved. Therefore, ethical review board approval and informed consent were not required in accordance with applicable institutional and international research ethics guidelines.

Competing interests

The authors declare that there are no competing interests regarding the publication of this paper.

Author contributions

Wening Purbatin Palupi Soenjoto: Conceptualization, methodology, literature review, data collection, analysis, writing original draft, supervision, and review.

Siti Nur Mahmudah: Data analysis, literature review, manuscript development, writing review and editing, validation, and final manuscript preparation.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from publicly accessible sources cited in the reference list, including published journal articles, books, official reports, and statistical publications. No proprietary datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

AI disclosure

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools were used solely to support language editing, grammar checking, and manuscript refinement. All interpretations, analyses, arguments, and conclusions presented in this article remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors reviewed and approved all content prior to submission.

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