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Challenges of a Chinese Indonesian in Taiwan

Every time someone in Taiwan asks where I am from and I tell them that I am Indonesian, I am met with confusion, followed by an awkward pause and responses such as: "But your skin tone is whiter than most of them" or "Are you really Indonesian? Why do you look so different?"

I laugh and answer: "Because I am a Chinese Indonesian."

However, that prompts another question: "Why can't you speak Chinese?"

I just laugh it off.

I have gotten used to the questions. Many Taiwanese assume that being Chinese means you can speak Mandarin fluently. Some ask: "But why can Chinese Singaporeans or Malaysians speak Chinese?"

Some will try Mandarin on me, and when I do not understand, the looks on their face change. It is like I have let them down without meaning to.

What they do not see is the truth that I, too, wish I could speak Chinese fluently.

However, that I am not able to speak Mandarin is not a personal failure. It is part of Indonesia's history, a part of the Chinese diaspora story many people do not know.

In Indonesia, being openly Chinese was not always safe. My grandparents were not allowed to speak Chinese, use Chinese names, or celebrate Lunar New Year openly during the era of former Indonesian president Suharto. Chinese Indonesians were forced to assimilate.

Even today, I have no family name because my father's is a Chinese name, so to avoid discrimination, he decided not to pass it down.

My parents did not speak Mandarin, because their parents were not allowed to. That is why I did not really grow up with it.

Now, I am trying to learn a language that should have been mine, but was taken away before I was even born.

文藻外語大學公共關係室剪報表格

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Many Chinese Indonesians, especially in Java, grew up like I did — speaking only Bahasa Indonesia. We lived like everyone else, except that we were constantly reminded we were different. When the economy crashes, we are blamed and reminded that we are still outsiders. In 1998, anti-Chinese riots swept through Indonesia. I was not born yet, but I grew up hearing stories about it. My family in Surabaya stayed up all night, ready to run if their home was attacked.

The trauma is still there. Even now, my heart races when I hear news about protests at home. That fear, although invisible, was passed down.

In Taiwan, I am seen as an outsider, too, because I cannot speak Mandarin. I have never felt fully accepted. It is like living in between.

There are also stereotypes here as well. Many Taiwanese often associate Indonesians with darker skin and migrant workers. I have had people question whether I am really Indonesian, simply because I do not fit that image.

What people do not understand is that my identity is not just about language or how I look. Being a Chinese Indonesian is about the generations of history my family carries — the struggles, the silences and the pain of hiding who we are.

Growing up, I always felt caught between two worlds. In Indonesia, we had to suppress our Chinese identity to stay safe. In Taiwan I am told I am not "Chinese enough."

I exist in between.

I have learned that my identity is more than just the language I could not learn, or the stereotypes people put on me. Being Chinese Indonesian means carrying my family's strength and their untold stories. It means shaping who I am, even when I do not fit into anyone's expectations.

I might not speak Mandarin the way people expect. I might not look the way they imagine, but this is my history. This is who I am. And that, in its own way, is enough.

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