

## The story of the Teochiu Huikuan building in Medan provides insights into Chinese Indonesians' history of dispossession

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**Reclaimed but not yet demolished**

*Yen-Ling Tsai*

I would like to invite you to join me in visiting a building in Medan, North Sumatra. Known to this day as the Teochiu Huikuan among the older generations of Chinese in Medan, the building was the clubhouse of the North Sumatran Teochiu Association, an organisation for people who identify with the Teochiu county in eastern Guangdong, China. Teochiu Chinese had a strong presence among the Chinese in North Sumatra due to the region's history of involvement in the plantation economy and coolie migration since the late nineteenth century. After moving from plantations to urban centres, these Teochiu coolie immigrants and their descendents established a community organisation in 1951, purchased land and built their clubhouse on it in

1962.

Opened in 1963, the building quickly became a centre of Chinese cultural life in Medan, functioning as a school, a clubhouse, and a performance venue. Unlike other Chinese clubhouses that often took the form of traditional shop-houses, the architectural style of the Teochiu Huikuan exuded a modernist sensibility. Not only did its three-story main façade hint at an Art-deco aesthetic, its state-of-the-art facilities appealed to both Teochiu and non-Teochiu Chinese. As one of the association's organisers, Pak Rudy, recalled, Chinese from all dialects and class backgrounds frequented the Teochiu Huikuan for its grand performance stage. Pak Anto, another organiser, reminisced in detail about a knock-out performance he saw in 1965, which so impressed him that he returned and watched the show again. Yet neither Pak Anto nor Pak Rudy could have imagined that they were witnessing one of the last Teochiu opera productions to be presented on that stage.

Just months after that performance, the Teochiu Huikuan – along with dozens of other Chinese-owned properties in North Sumatra – was confiscated by the local military commander. The raid was part of the second of two large-scale, forced dispossessions of Chinese communal properties in the province after independence. In the first, Chinese schools labeled as 'pro-Taipei' had been shut down or 'nationalised' under a series of military-administered regulations during 1957-1958, and again in early 1965. In the wake of the communist purges across Indonesia, the response of the regional military command and local preman in North Sumatra against suspected communist sympathisers was particularly repressive. Labeled as 'pro-Beijing', thousands of Chinese in Aceh and North Sumatra were forced to relocate and ultimately seek repatriation to China. Nationally, Chinese language schools were officially closed and other similarly identified buildings were occupied and confiscated in the first half of 1966.

## **Fear and torture**

Unlike the majority of the confiscated buildings in Medan, which were turned into state schools, the Teochiu Huikuan fell into the hands of the Operational Command for the Restoration of Security and Order (Laksus Kopkamtib). From 1966 through to 1978, the building was transformed into a detention camp, where the military interrogated, tortured and incarcerated political prisoners. Classrooms of a Teochiu kindergarten were converted into prison cells where detainees waited from weeks to years before being released or meeting their death. The space beneath the performance stage in the main auditorium became a torture chamber. Around one metre in height, this space was half-filled with water and filth and heavily infested with mosquitoes. Prisoners could neither stand, sit, nor lie down and most collapsed after one or two of days of being forced to stand in this pool. Many prisoners perished in the detention camp.

## **The Teochiu Huikuan fell into the hands of the Operational Command for the Restoration of Security and Order**

Some people in North Sumatra found themselves more likely than others to be victimised by Laksus. These included not only Communist Party members, but also ‘communist sympathisers’ and Chinese businessmen – along with New Order political dissenters. Pak Wijaya, an ex-Chinese school teacher, recalled how Laksus used the Teochiu Huikuan to terrorise the Chinese community. Prior to 1965, when they encountered difficulties applying for Indonesian citizenship not a few Chinese in Medan sought help from Baperki, a prominent left-leaning Chinese political organisation. After the central military command banned Baperki in October 1965 for its pro-communist stance, Laksus accused some of these Barperki-affiliated Chinese of active involvement in the organisation, imprisoning them in the Teochiu Huikuan and releasing them only after their families handed over large sums of money. Others paid in advance to avoid the misfortune.

The horror of the Teochiu Huikuan thus seeped into the most intimate and mundane aspects of life in Medan. A friend, Ester, once told me of her strong sense of disquiet about the Teochiu Huikuan building when growing up in the 1970s. She remembered often being silenced by her mother with the words, ‘Stop crying, or Laksus will take you to Jalan Ghandi!’, referring to the Teochiu Huikuan building. The building remained a symbol of state terrorism long after it was converted into a military dormitory in 1978. After the dormitory relocated a few years later, the building spent many years shuttered and unused. More than a building, then, the Teochiu Huikuan became a building block of the New Order’s culture of fear.

## **Rebirth and destruction**

The story of a building like the Teochiu Huikuan does not end with confiscation or disuse. In 1989, seven members of the old North Sumatra Teochiu Association tried to recuperate the organisation and reclaim the building. But their effort was short-lived. The fall of the New Order brought with it new possibilities. In early 2000, several Teochiu Chinese initiated a series of meetings. The result was the formation of the Medan Teochiu Mutual-aid Charity Foundation, whose leaders were prominent businessmen of Teochiu background. By June, the foundation had successfully acquired legal ownership of the Teochiu Huikuan through negotiating with leaders of the old North Sumatran Teochiu Association. Thus becoming the lawful heir to the Teochiu Huikuan, the foundation paid their first visit to the regional military command accompanied by a prominent Medan Chinese leader. The reclamation of the Teochiu Huikuan took off from there.

## **The military command returned the Teochiu Huikuan to the Medan Teochiu Mutual-aid**

## Charity Foundation in December 2003

The military command returned the Teochiu Huikuan to the Medan Teochiu Mutual-aid Charity Foundation in December 2003. But this rebirth of the building's Chinese identity came to mean its ultimate destruction. Eight months after this reclamation, the foundation tore down the building and launched in full earnest a new construction plan. By 2006, a five-story building complex stood on the site, promising to bring activities as diverse as conferencing, performance, Teochiu-style dining, Chinese language learning, and Teochiu deity worshipping all under one roof.

But not everyone in the Chinese community approves of this project. Several young professionals I met in Medan did not support the reclamation and reconstruction of the Teochiu Huikuan. In their view, buildings such as these have much more to offer beyond commercial use. The political significance of the Huikuan as an ex-detention site is enormous, they argued. If properly preserved, the Huikuan would be a perfect counter-monument that bears solemn witness to the injustice shared by both the Chinese and the non-Chinese Indonesians.

More fundamentally, these younger generations were concerned with the political economy of the so-called reclamation. Although the foundation had established legal ownership, it still paid an enormous sum to gain possession of the property. It is common knowledge in Medan that plenty of other organisations had kept good records of their property rights. But without money, until now their efforts have born no fruit.

It is commonly understood that the banning of Chinese organisations and schools as well as the confiscation of their properties in mid-twentieth century Indonesia seriously deprived the Chinese of the means to engage in communal activities. But these large-scale dispossessions of Chinese communal properties did more than displacing certain notions of Chineseness. As the above case study shows, many Chinese Indonesians affected by dispossession coped by enacting precisely the stereotypical constructions of Chineseness. In 2004 the Teochiu Chinese had to pool their resources to buy the Teochiu Huikuan, much like the Baperki-affiliated Chinese did in 1966 in order to buy their freedom. Both were held to ransom by a power exercised through terror and coercion. Moreover, what both parties did unwittingly solidified the stereotype that the Chinese can pay, will pay – and indeed should be doomed to pay – for everything, including what is already theirs. In this sense, the suppression of Chinese community life through property dispossession in effect constructed and consolidated certain notions of Chineseness, just as it had displaced others.     **ii**

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