

Presented in workshop “Racialisation and Social Boundary Making in Times of COVID-19”

on 3-4 December 2020 in Amsterdam, The Netherlands

## **The Framing of Chinese Foreign Workers in Indonesian Online Media during COVID-19 Outbreak**

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The stereotyping of Chinese foreign workers in Indonesia is increasing rapidly during the COVID-19 outbreak. Before the outbreak, the Indonesian society already has a negative perspective towards Chinese descendants or Chinese workers who portrayed as troublemaker by several parties in Indonesia. They were perceived as “job-stealer” and even “communist agents” who tries to take over this country. Now, they are also accused as a deadly virus-carrier. This portrayal added a new dimension into the negative image of Chinese workers in Indonesia. Furthermore, we can identify the stereotyping of Chinese workers based on the news in online media. They performed as an outlet in which the stereotyping can be seen from their released news. Based from their point of view in delivering the news, we can analyse the preferences of the media towards Chinese workers. Hereinafter, this paper will try to answer the question: “How the Indonesian online media frame the image of Chinese workers during the COVID-19 outbreak?” The grounded data for this research will be collected from online news of two prominent media: Kompas.com and Republika.co.id. The Kompas.com is a secular-based online media, while Republika.co.id represents the Islamic-based media. We will analyse the news for six months from March 2020 (when Indonesia officially published the first COVID-19 cases) until August 2020 (when Indonesia is expected to recover from the COVID-19). We will use the framing analysis with qualitative approach. We will also combine it with the identity formation concept to explain the stereotyping that befell to the Chinese workers.

**Keywords:** Chinese foreign workers, COVID-19, stereotyping, framing, Indonesia.

## Introduction

Being a Chinese in Indonesia means that you may face many negative consequences. This condition applies for both Chinese Indonesians<sup>1</sup>, and recently, a Chinese<sup>2</sup> worker. If you happen to be a foreign worker from China mainland, some people will call you a “job-stealer”. This accusation come from the influx of Chinese workers to fill the job market in this country. For the last 6 years, the Chinese workers allegedly flooded Indonesian job market alongside the policy from President Joko Widodo to open the investment for China in the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway construction (Herlijanto, 2017). In contrast, Indonesia still faces a lack of job opportunity for its local people. Indonesia still facing a 4.99% open unemployment rate per February 2020, while the number of unemployment increasing as much as 60.000 people by the same year (Biro Pusat Statistik, 2020). However, during COVID-19 outbreak, the unemployment rate skyrocketed to 1,76 million people per May 2020 (Suryanto, 2020). On the other hand, there is a common belief that Indonesia already accepted 10 million Chinese foreign workers although this number was clarified by President Joko Widodo to merely 23.000 workers (Secretary for Cabinet Documents, 2018).

The influx of Chinese foreign workers to Indonesia create a strong rejection from the local inhabitants especially in the area which they were posted. For example, some 100 students in Kendari town of South East Sulawesi demonstrated in the city’s airport upon arrival of 120 Chinese workers. The protesters even conducted a “sweeping” and halted vehicles that came out from airport hoped to catch the Chinese workers inside (Amy Chew, 2020). Furthermore, the local legislative body in Kendari also voiced the same rejection against Chinese workers. They alarmed that Kendari people will react aggressively if Jakarta continues the influx of

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, authors use the term “Chinese Indonesians” to refer to local Indonesian citizen with Chinese descendants.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term “Chinese” to address foreigner or People’s Republic of China’s citizens.

Chinese workers while the local workers are threatened to get a laid-off (Pati, Kiki Andi, Karunia, 2020).

However, the rejection of Chinese workers in Indonesia is not always happens to all of them. One interesting finding suggest that the rejection mainly directed towards the Chinese low-skilled workers because they were perceived as direct threat to Indonesian workers (Herlijanto, 2017). In contrast, the highly skilled workers, such as technicians and managers, are mostly welcomed (Herlijanto, 2017). The perception towards Chinese workers in a nationwide survey by ISEAS Yusof Ishak Singapore can be seen in the figure below.

***Attitudes over Chinese immigration. Chinese workers should...***

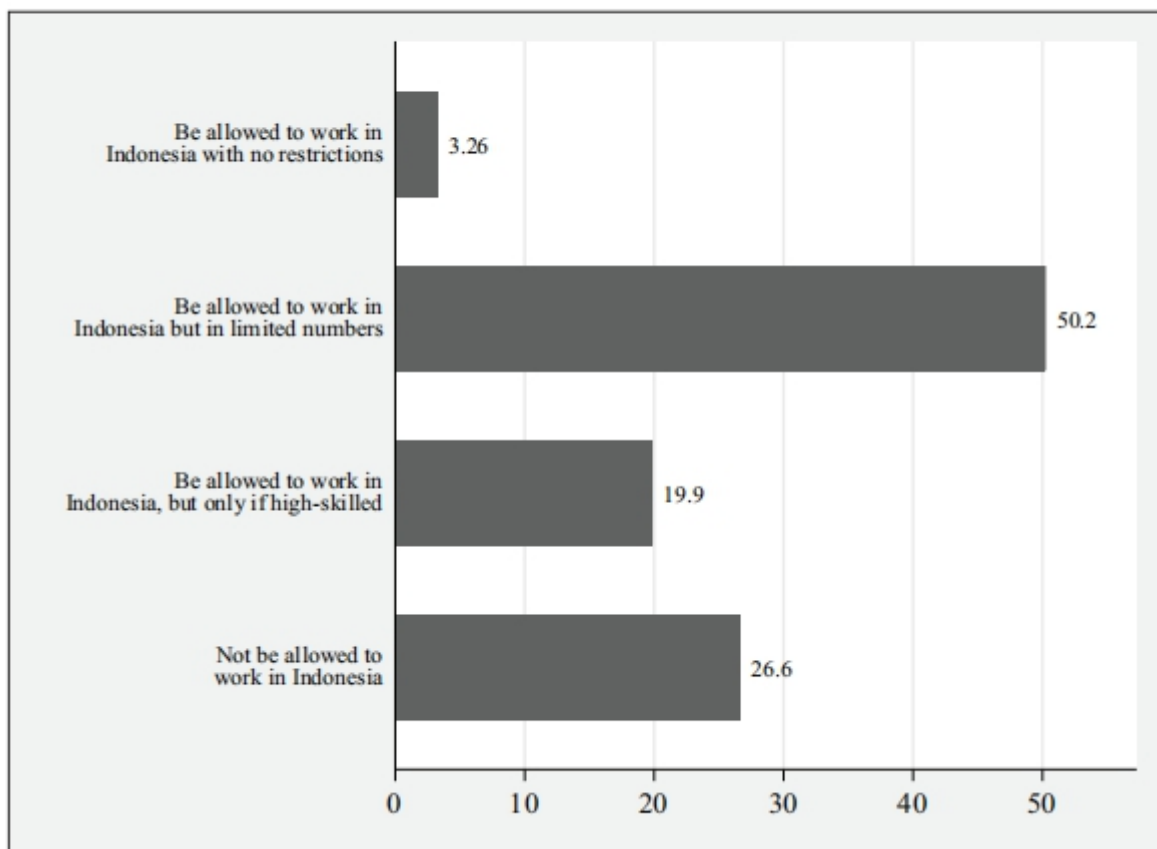


Figure 1. The attitudes towards Chinese workers

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Source: Diego Fossati et. al. “The Indonesian National Survey Project,” p.

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Recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, the stereotype towards Chinese workers multiplied with one claim: “virus-spreader”. Global trends show that blaming China for COVID-19 is a popular choice. In Europe, the Asian people were targeted by online harassment, verbal and physical abuse, and racial targeting (Roberto, Katherine J, Johnson, Andrew F, Rauhaus, 2020). On the other side of the globe, the New York City Commission on Human Rights gathered 248 reports of harassment and discrimination towards the Asian descent, included claims of discrimination based upon race and national origin across numbers of policy areas including housing, hotel accommodations, and employment (Noble, 2020).

The fear of Chinese workers as a “virus-spreader” also happens in Indonesia. On March 2020, a 58-second video about 49 Chinese workers that arrived in Kendari, completed with their luggage and mask in their face, circulated massively in Indonesia. The video contains narration that accused them for being already infected by COVID-19 and ready to spread it in Indonesia (Suryadinata, 2020b). The video is only one example of how does the Chinese foreign worker images builds in the time of COVID-19 outbreak.

From the aforementioned cases, we can see the role of online media in circulating the negative image of Chinese workers. Specifically, we focusing our observations to the mainstream online media in Indonesia. The mainstream media can act as an outlet of public discourse in Indonesia. In this paper, we will focus to the role of online media in mediating the message to the audience, thus, activated the negative stereotyping through framing process. Further, as we will elaborate later, the mainstream online media in Indonesia such as *Kompas.com*, *Republika.co.id*, and *Tempo.com* gives a significant portion of the Chinese foreign workers issues. Some of them even frame the issues in a negative way.

Our main research question is “How the Indonesian online media stereotypes the image of Chinese workers during the COVID-19 outbreak?” To answer the question, we argue that the

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negative image towards Chinese workers in Indonesia is affected by a dominant discourse of stereotyping towards Chinese Indonesians. The discourse of negative stereotyping towards Chinese Indonesians itself resulted from the history of interaction between natives and them that often ended with bitter skirmishes. As we will explain in next part, the natives in Indonesia often blames Chinese Indonesians for the economic, social, and political crises in this country. This experience later “activated” by the framing of media towards the Chinese worker issues. In the meantime, the historic hostility between natives and Chinese also multiplied with the economic issues when the Chinese workers accused to steal the native’s job opportunity. Our research will deepen the analysis over the emergence and spread of negative stereotyping towards Chinese workers in the middle of COVID-19 outbreak especially in Indonesia.

## **Literature Review**

Recently, the issue Chinese foreign workers in Indonesia sparks a new discussion on academic discourse. Most of the research on this issues portrayed the tensions between Chinese and local workers. The local workers frequently perceived Chinese workers as competitors in the job market, especially after the influx of Chinese workers as part of increasing partnership between Indonesia and China. For example, Suryadinata (2020) explained about the “xinyimin” (new migrants) from China that coming to Southeast Asian countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, both as businessman/investors and migrant workers. Furthermore, he concluded that the local people protest against “xinyimin” mostly targeted to the migrant workers, while the investors did not face the same resentment (Suryadinata, 2020a). In addition, Suryadinata explained that the tension against “xinyimin” is not only come from local people, but also from the Chinese Indonesian itself. They perceived “xinyimin” as competitors and a threat (Suryadinata, 2020a).

Herlijanto (2017) also underlined the suspicion from local workers towards Chinese workers, especially the low-skilled ones that perceived as a threat for the locals. Meanwhile, the locals generally welcomed the high-skilled Chinese workers such as managers and technicians

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(Herlijanto, 2017). Fossati et.al (2017) elaborated more on this condition with their research “Indonesian National Survey Project: Economy, Society, and Politic”. The survey concluded that the locals expected Indonesian government to limit the numbers of Chinese workers and strengthening the entry requirements (Fossati, Diego, Yew-Foong Hui, 2017). The main concerns towards the influx of Chinese workers are the exact number of them and for how long they will stay in Indonesia (Damuri, Yose Rizal; Perkasa, Vidhyandika; Atje, Raymond; Hirawan, 2019). The government itself could not explain transparently about this case. As a consequence, the public tend to questioning the motives of the Chinese workers.

Despite the threat poses by Chinese workers to the job opportunity of the locals, they are also suspected to bring another negative impact to Indonesia. The Chinese workers accused for involved in several criminal activities such as felony against immigration issues, being illegal workers, involved in drug smuggling and human trafficking, especially prostitution (Maksum, Ali, Sahide, 2019). However, the research about Chinese workers during COVID-19 pandemic is still limited. One research elaborated the tensions between local government and central government over the entrance of 49 Chinese workers in Kendari despite the fear over the spread of COVID-19 (see Suryadinata, 2020b). He concluded that the conflict resulted from the concern from local government over the rise of unemployment in their area and the negative attitude towards Chinese workers as a suspected virus carrier.

Regarding the literature on identity-based stereotyping and stigmatization during COVID-19 outbreak in the world, there are still few researches that tackle this issue. However, the issue itself already surge into contemporary discussion in the academic field. For example, Roberto et.al (2020) mapped the discrimination and, sometimes, violence towards Asian community in Northern America, Europe, and Australia during COVID-19 outbreak. They argue that the stereotyping comes from the lack of information about virus’s spreading pattern that leading them to accuse the Asian community as potential virus spreaders (Roberto, Katherine J, Johnson, Andrew F, Rauhaus, 2020). Because some of the COVID-19 patient itself have no visible symptoms, as a consequence, people might use stigmatization and stereotyping “...as

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people use traits (e.g., race), other than symptoms, to determine who might be infected”( Roberto et.al, 2020).

The pandemic itself provided the ground to the xenophobic discourse that led some leaders to used nationalism issues, thus, resulted in discrimination against the immigrant or foreigner (Clissold, Elliott; Nylander, Davina; Watson, Cameron; Ventriglio, 2020). On the other hand, the discrimination itself also spurred in People’s Republic of China as people that originated from Wuhan and Hubei Province (the “ground zero” of COVID-19) are prohibited to move to other area because the other province have set-up check points to block them (He, Jun; He, Leshui; Zhou, Wen; Nie, Xuanhua; He, 2020).

Finally, the circulation of negative images of Asian/Chinese community throughout the world is facilitated by media outlets. Regarding this issue, the social media have a large impact. Lizhou Fan et.al (2020) built a model that tracked the Hate Speech and Negative Sentiments in Twitter by using keywords “china+and+coronavirus”. As a result, they found 3,457,402 key tweets about China and COVID-19, with 25,467 Hate Speech occurrences (see Fan, Lizhou; Yu, Huizi; Yin, 2020). Still based on data from Twitter, Li et.al (2020) also concluded that COVID-19 is linked with certain geographical locations and ethnicities. Thus, it created the stigma towards citizens from these area or ethnic groups community.

## **Data**

The Indonesian mass media have a distinct and specific ideological tendency between them. Thus, we select the mass media, specifically the online news media, that able to represent this difference. We take this approach because it can reflect the trend of news media in framing the Chinese foreign workers issue during the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia. We choose two online media namely *kompas.com* and *republika.co.id*.

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The timeline of our data collection for 6 months and ranging from 2 March 2020 until 31 August 2020. We choose the date of 2 March 2020 because this is the day when Indonesian President Joko Widodo officially announced the first COVID-19 case in this country. In the same timeline, we found that the number of reporting about Chinese foreign workers in both media are increasing.

## **Methods**

### Framing Analysis

In this research, we use the framing model from Semetko & Valkenburg (2000). They elaborated five news frame to identified stereotypes in news publishing that we use to analyze the articles from *kompas.com* and *republika.co.id* :

1. Conflict Frame
2. Human Interest Frame
3. Economic Consequences Frame
4. Morality Frame
5. Responsibility Frame

## **Finding**

### **I.1 Responsibility Frame**

If we use the Diagnostic Framing analytical tool, we can point out two main factors in the published articles: what is the problems and who are to blame. In general, most of the articles in *Republika.co.id* (later called “Republika” and *Kompas.com* (later called “Kompas”) have a common tone. Both of them displayed protest towards the Indonesian government and local authority over the entrance of Chinese foreign workers. The protesters itself came from the local legislator members, central legislator members, politicians, and labor leaders. And the ones to be blamed definitely were the local and central government. On the other hand, the main problems are the procedural dimension and specially the legal foundation of the



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Chinese foreign worker arrival such as the immigration status, work permit, and health certificate during this outbreak. Both of these medias highlighted the inconsistencies of government in enforcing the law. *Republika* even underlined the weakness of Indonesian government against its Chinese counterparts in terms of their foreign workers (Akbar, 2020a).

## **I.2 Conflict Frame**

From the Conflict Frame, both of these medias also have a relatively common tone. The articles in this classification mostly published the stories about the rejection from local community towards the influx of Chinese foreign workers. All in all, the problem mainly based at the fact that Chinese foreign workers still insisted to enter the industrial area despite strong rejection from local community. The rejection itself showed by demonstration, protests, and even violence that aimed at the Chinese foreign workers. Some interviewees in the articles even accused that the Chinese foreign workers have already brought the COVID-19 virus in their body despite the fact that they have already took the medical check-up.

Both of the medias gave a room for biased statements that linked the COVID-19 virus and the Chinese workers. For example, *Republika* quoted one student leader in Southeast Sulawesi saying, “In the middle of the outbreak, the government should restrict the entrance of Chinese workers to our area, let alone they came from the infected area” (Firmansyah, 2020). In addition, *Kompas* quoted the statement from major of Kendari city saying, “This virus is coming from China. Meanwhile, the foreign workers that entering our area is also Chinese although their administration status is clear. I hope that central government helping us to avoid the conflict in our community” (Ramadhan, 2020).

## **I.3 Economic Consequences Frame**

From this framing, we found that the articles in *Republika* and *Kompas* have a significant difference. The articles in *Republika* tend to depict the Chinese workers that been able to get the job while the local people are still face the lack of job opportunity. Thus, the COVID-19 outbreak already causing many local people to lost the job, yet the government give the job to foreigner. One statement from legislator said that, “There are millions that loses their job and

financial capability. We cannot let the available jobs instead given to the foreign workers (Akbar, 2020b). In contrast, Kompas tend to portray the competition between Chinese and local workers as a normal consequence from the globalization. Further, one of the interviewee in Kompas argued that, “Where in the world that we cannot find competition nowadays? We must educate the people about the survival of the fittest law from Charles Darwin”(Karunia, 2020). Also, if the Indonesian government are not able to recruit Chinese workers, they could not substitute it from the local workers since they are lack of technical ability.

#### **I.4 Human Interest Frame**

Compared with other frame type, both of Republika and Kompas relatively give less space for human interest frame. Both of Kompas and Republika only published one article that related with the human interest aspect of Chinese foreign workers. Republika tell a story about one Chinese workers that refused to went back to his country because the company have not fulfilled his worker’s rights. The workers portrayed as hard-headed, not willing to negotiate, even yelling and went rampage in the airport to get his demand fulfilled (Ahmad, 2020).

On a more positive tone, Kompas published article about how Indonesia should follow the China’s recovery steps after COVID-19 outbreak. The respondent from Ministry of Maritime and Investment argued that, “We should learn towards China that already able to bounce back. So, we must leave the negative thought towards them as if all the Chinese workers are dangerous”(Miranti, 2020).

#### **I.5 Morality Frame**

Based on our findings, the morality frame is the most distinct frame between these two media outlets. We found 4 articles that using morality frames from Republika compared to none in Kompas. Most of these articles in Republika quoted the statement from religious leaders and religion-based non-governmental organization. This fact is relatively normal since Republika has a deep root in Moslem community in Indonesia. Indeed, the morality perspective in

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criticizing the influx of Chinese workers mostly using the identity-based approach in stereotype-building process.

For example, one Moslem priest described the Chinese as a “Kumpeni” that refers to the Dutch colonial ruler in pre-independence era. He depicted China—as an origin of Chinese workers—as an imperialist that have local henchman to exploited the native people (Yusuf, 2020). Another statements that published in *Republika* had echoed the accusation of communist agent and undercover Red Army that preparing to invade Indonesia (Ichsan, 2020)—an indictment that is so popular in Indonesia specially after 1965 Coup d’Etat. Lastly, one article included statement from NGO leader that comparing between the fact that Chinese workers can enter Indonesia while the Moslem community cannot even allow to go to mosque to pray (Mabruroh, 2020).

## **Conclusions**

The *Republika* and *Kompas* have their own approach in publishing the stories about Chinese workers in Indonesia. The *Republika* tend to portray the Chinese migrant workers as a threat and outsider. In addition, the *Republika* try to align themselves with the local workers, indigenous group and Moslem community in this issue. As a result, they give a more space in their articles towards the statements that comes from these groups. If we look to the frames, *Republika* tend to use the Responsibility Frame, Morality Frame, and Economic Consequences in their articles. The Responsibility Frame of *Republika* bring out the government—both local and central—as the most responsible actors to let the Chinese workers fill the job opportunity in Indonesia. Further, this frame also relates with the Economic Consequences Frame that picture the Chinese workers as a “job-stealer”. The Chinese workers is taking over the job opportunity from local workers, thus, bringing them in a more vulnerable economic condition. Lastly, in the Morality Frame, the stereotyping later accumulated with the accusation of Chinese workers as a “communist-agent” and “colonialist” that try to invade Indonesia. This frame consequently activating the historical trauma and atrocities against communism in Indonesia that still lingers in Indonesian society after the 1965 Tragedy.

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Meanwhile, Kompas choose a subtle approach towards the Chinese workers. The articles in Kompas mostly fit with the Conflict Frame that underline the antagonism between Chinese and local workers without openly taking sides between them. Kompas tend to write the articles about Chinese workers in the context of conflict which resulted from the disagreement with the officials or local workers itself. Moreover, Kompas did not frame the issues using the Morality Frame that tend to divide the audience towards this issue.

From the publication of these two media, we can see that the media itself have an opportunity goes in line with the ‘mental images’ of their audience. In contrast, they also have an opportunity to counter the already established ‘mental images’ by offering other perspective to grasp the issue. Regarding the issue of Chinese workers during COVID-19, the diseases itself multiplied the negative image towards Chinese workers in Indonesia. On the contrary, we can see that the main grievances from the local workers and local community is the stereotype in the economic and social issues rather than the virus itself. The COVID-19 outbreak, thus, bringing out again the debates in Chinese workers existence and potentially encasing it with another layer of stereotyping.

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