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## Prejudice toward the Xinyimin in Indonesia: testing the integrated threat model

Tommy Yotes, Stephen M. Croucher, and Elena Maydell

### ABSTRACT

China's Belt and Road Initiative has galvanized new Chinese migration to Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. The presence of the new Chinese migrants (*Xinyimin*) has not gone without resistance in Indonesia. This study examines the effects of history of intergroup conflicts and contact on the formation of threat perceptions toward the *Xinyimin* in Indonesia. The findings revealed both history of conflicts and contact predict realistic threat and highlight the importance of open communication in mitigating intergroup biases.

### KEYWORDS

Prejudice; intergroup conflict; integrated threat theory; Indonesia; regression

Past research suggests the history of conflicts influences threat perceptions in intergroup relations. This phenomenon is visible in Indonesia, where the presence of new Chinese migrants, or *Xinyimin* (新移民), has created tensions at grassroots levels. In January 2023, Indonesian workers clashed with their Chinese counterparts at PT Nickel Gunbuster Industry in Morowali, Central Sulawesi, leading to escalated violence. Two workers, one Indonesian and one Chinese reportedly died, and others were injured (Suryadinata & Negara, 2023). This conflict reflects a survey by Fossati et al. (2017), which revealed over 70% of Indonesians support imposing restrictions or control over the influx of Chinese workers into Indonesia. Conflicts or tensions between the *Xinyimin* and locals usually stem from labor competitions. In 2015, locals demanded the Indonesian Ministry of Manpower revoke the work permits of 799 Chinese working at a cement factory in Lebak, West Java, due to the environmental damage they caused (Bisnis.com, 2015). Locals also rejected the arrival of 49 Chinese migrant workers in Konawe, Southeast Sulawesi, in March 2020, which was followed by another protest opposing the planned arrival of 500 Chinese workers in June, accusing them of taking local jobs and bringing COVID-19 to Indonesia (CNN Indonesia, 2020; Pati & Khairina, 2020). Lin (2020) provides preliminary insights into the demographic characteristics of the *Xinyimin* in Indonesia, revealing that most belong to the middle or lower classes, are typically under 35 years old, and enter Indonesia

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with various types of visas. In terms of occupation, these Chinese nationals work for Chinese state-owned companies, private firms, and Chinese-Indonesian joint ventures in various industries—from mining to manufacturing, finance, service, tourism, and education.

The grassroots conflicts between the Xinyimin and local workers in Indonesia indicate an increasing level of prejudice toward the former, and understanding this phenomenon is vital through a communication lens. From a practical standpoint, such knowledge is key to mitigating intergroup conflicts through improved communication in a region where gradual demographic changes are inevitable. Theoretically, this phenomenon offers a scenario for testing the integrated threat theory (ITT) (Stephan & Stephan, 1996), a well-established theory in prejudice and communication. Examining this phenomenon as a social issue through the ITT lenses is crucial as the model presents a structured way to identify the sources of intergroup tensions and conflicts.

Consequently, this study aims to understand the various public perceptions in Indonesia on perceived threats posed by the Xinyimin, whose arrivals became prominent following the post-Belt and Road Initiative projects. This examination is grounded in the notion that threats arise when the dominant group feels their interests are at risk due to the presence of others (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010). The current study employs ITT to investigate the nature of prejudice toward the Xinyimin, focusing on threat, history of conflict, and contact variables.

### **Integrated threat model**

Stephan and Stephan (1996) introduced four central threats that can lead to prejudice. *Realistic threat* involves socioeconomic, political, and physical welfare. *Symbolic threat* refers to the perceived threat to an in-group's values or beliefs when they interact with an outgroup (Stephan et al., 1998). *Intergroup anxiety* stems from fear of embarrassment, rejection, or ridicule during intergroup interactions (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). *Negative stereotypes* represent a threat or anticipation from the ingroup concerning how members of the outgroup should behave (Croucher et al., 2021).

Corenblum and Stephan (2001) highlight the roles of threat antecedents in ITT, suggesting they could shape threat perceptions. Such threat antecedents include 1) *history of intergroup conflicts* — the more extensive and violent the history of conflict between groups, the higher the likelihood people feel threatened by the other group (Corenblum & Stephan, 2001; Stephan et al., 2002); and 2) *contact* — the more negative, less frequent contacts experienced by ingroup members, the more likely they see outgroup(s) as a threat, and vice versa (González et al., 2008).

ITT has confirmed the links between threat perceptions and prejudice in the context of the host society-migrant relationships. Nshom and Arzamastseva (2021) found realistic threat was linked to prejudicial views and attitudes toward Chinese migrants in Cameroon. Using ITT, Vallejo-Martín et al. (2020) found individuals with precarious employment in Spain are more likely to feel threatened by Syrian refugees, due to competition for resources. A study by Pereira et al. (2010) in 21 European countries revealed that prejudice toward immigrants were largely driven by employment and security concerns. They also found similar findings in Portugal which traditionally has been a nation with a high rate of emigration (Pereira et al., 2010). Furthermore, realistic and symbolic threats are also found to act as strong predictors of prejudice toward foreign workers, including Chinese, in Singapore (Ramsay & Pang, 2015).

Understanding the relationship between perceived threats and their antecedents is key to identifying important factors that shape prejudice. Realistic threats involve concerns about tangible resources scarcity, while symbolic threats relate to fears about challenges to cultural values and beliefs. In a revised version of ITT, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes are viewed as potential antecedents of realistic and symbolic threats, not as perceived threats (Rios et al., 2018); hence, given this reason, this study excludes these two variables.

The perception of threat is key to prejudice formation; thus, a perceived threat, even if not real, is sufficient to foster prejudice (Croucher et al., 2013). Despite this understanding, research on the Xinyimin and prejudice in Indonesia remains limited. Thus, to fill this gap and further explore the relationship, the following research questions are proposed:

**RQ1:** To what extent does history of intergroup conflicts predict perceived threats toward the Xinyimin in Indonesia?

**RQ2:** To what extent does contact with the Xinyimin predict perceived threats toward the Xinyimin in Indonesia?

## **Method**

### ***Participants and procedures***

Following ethics approval in 2023, 907 Indonesians completed a survey via Survey Monkey, with respondents given the opportunity to participate in a raffle with a prize worth US\$95 (in local currency). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted to ensure the

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

Variable	<i>n</i> = 907	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age		34.11	9.7
Sex			
Female	647 (71.3%)		
Male	260 (28.7%)		
Ethnicity			
Javanese	455 (50.2%)		
Sundanese	152 (16.8%)		
Chinese Indonesian	105 (11.6%)		
Betawi	41 (4.5%)		
Batak	29 (3.2%)		
Others	125 (13.8%)		
Domicile			
West Java	311 (34.3%)		
Jakarta	184 (20.3%)		
East Java	123 (13.6%)		
Central Java	111 (12.2%)		
Sumatra	85 (9.4%)		
Sulawesi	18 (2.0%)		
Bali	8 (.9%)		
Kalimantan	22 (2.4%)		
Others	10 (1.1%)		

validity of constructs, following the criteria set by Hu and Bentler (1999). Following criteria set forth by Croucher and Kelly (2019), problematic items causing significant error were removed. Table 1 contains demographic details.

### Instruments

Measure of *realistic threat* has eight items, which include statements such as “the Xinyimin get more from this country than they contribute” and are rated on a seven-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7) (Curşeu et al., 2007). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this measure is .78. Measure of *symbolic threat* comprises seven items, which include such statements as “the value and beliefs of Xinyimin regarding moral and religious issues are not compatible with those of most Indonesians.” This measure is rated on a seven-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this measure is .35.<sup>1</sup>

Measure of *history of intergroup conflicts* has four items, such as “Relations between native Indonesians and Xinyimin have always been characterised by conflicts” and is assessed on a seven-point scale from (1) *strongly disagree* to (7) *strongly agree*. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this measure is .84. Measure of *contact* comprises four items, including such statements as “Do you have contact with Xinyimin in your neighbourhood?” The items were assessed on a 4-point scale, ranging from (1) *none/never* to (4) *only Xinyimin friends/often*. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this measure is .85.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 2.** Regression model for realistic threat.

Regressor	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	5.48	.61	2.50	.09
Sex	.04	.11	.10**	.10
Age	-.08*	.01	-.04	.01
Sundanese	-.06	.15	-.06	.12
Chinese Indonesians	-.28**	.16	-.23**	.14
Betawi	.02	.23	.03	.19
Batak	-.09*	.27	-.07*	.23
Other ethnicities	-.04	.16	-.02	.14
West Java	-.01	.14	-.01	.12
East Java	-.03	.17	-.05	.15
Central Java	-.02	.18	-.01	.15
Sumatra	-.07	.20	-.03	.17
Other Domicile	.00	.19	.01	.16
History of conflicts			.52**	.03
Contact			-.06*	.05
<i>F</i>	9.34**		37.38**	
$\Delta F$	9.34**		182.83**	

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .001$ , \*\*\* $p < .0001$ .

## Results

This study used multiple-regression analysis to answer the research question, aiming to predict threat. As the symbolic threat measure was unreliable, only realistic threat was examined. The following predictor variables were entered: Step 1) sex, age, ethnicity, and city of domicile; Step 2) history of intergroup conflicts and contact; and Step 3) realistic threat. In Model 1, sex, age, ethnicity, and city of domicile were entered ( $R^2 = .11$ ). In Model 2, history of intergroup conflicts and contact were entered, showing a significant improvement over Model 1 ( $R^2 = .37$ ;  $R^2_{adj} = .36$ ;  $\Delta F = 182.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, model 2 was retained for analysis. Model 2 in Table 2 highlights notable effects on realistic threat. Sex ( $b = .10$ ) is a significant predictor of realistic threat, with males having higher levels of realistic threat. Individuals identified as Chinese Indonesians ( $b = -.23$ ) and Batak ( $b = -.07$ ) are less likely to feel threatened by the Xinyimin. History of conflicts ( $b = .52$ ) also significantly predicts threat. The results also suggest contact ( $b = -.06$ ) is a significant predictor of realistic threat.

## Discussion

Our results found the strongest predictor of realistic threat is the history of intergroup conflicts in the context of intergroup relations between Indonesians and the Xinyimin. The more intense and lengthy history of intergroup conflict between groups, the more likely individuals will believe other groups pose a threat to their well-being (Stephan et al., 2002). Such threats are often communicated through one-way communication models, such as anti-immigration protests and political speeches in which politicians

try to convince voters that migrants are hurting their countries in many aspects, from the economy to public health (Nshom, 2024).

Contact also significantly predicts realistic threat, with more contact leading to less threat. This shows that perceived economic threats can be reduced when individuals interact more with the Xinyimin. When people have more frequent and better quality of contact, they tend to feel less threatened by the other group and experience less intergroup anxiety (Stephan et al., 2000). Lack of communication and knowledge, especially arising from minimal intergroup and interpersonal contact can engender ignorance, which often leads to suspicion, stereotypes, and rumors, hence strained intergroup relations (Zhang, 2016). There is little research on contact between locals and the Xinyimin. Hildayanti et al. (2021) explored interactions between locals and Chinese workers in Morowali, Central Sulawesi, and found they perceived the latter both positively and negatively through socioeconomic interactions. Future studies may want to investigate the contact between these two groups further.

Our findings add valuable insights into the existing ITT model in that they extend our understanding of the links between the history of conflicts, contact, and perceived threats. We found history of conflicts and contact predict realistic threat, which is consistent with previous research (Stephan et al., 2000, 2002). This suggests the model may serve as a useful theoretical tool to predict prejudice in the Indonesian context.

As for demographics, sex is a significant predictor of realistic threat. Those identifying as male are more likely than females to perceive Xinyimin as threatening their economic well-being. This finding supports previous studies arguing males are more susceptible to being prejudiced (Altemeyer, 1998; McFarland, 2010; Parrillo & Donoghue, 2005). Males are still traditionally perceived as breadwinners in Indonesian society (Utari, 2018). They constitute 61% of Indonesia's total labor force (as of February 2023) and dominate most sectors, including manufacturing, as well as corporate culture (International Labour Organization ILO, 2020; Ministry of Manpower Indonesia, 2024). These factors may make them feel more sensitive to job competition and economic security, hence perceiving the Xinyimin as a threat to their economic well-being.

Last, individuals identifying as Chinese Indonesians and Batak are less likely to feel threatened by the Xinyimin. This finding, especially concerning Chinese Indonesians, challenges Suryadinata's (2020) claim that they consider the Xinyimin a threat and competition. Chinese Indonesians' lower realistic threat perception toward the Xinyimin may be due to their strong entrepreneurial culture and relative economic success over other ethnic groups (Mackie, 1998; Virgosita, 2020). This may provide them with a sense of stability and security, which may result in lower threat perceptions toward the Xinyimin. As for those identified

as Batak, an ethnic group of North Sumatra, their lower level of perceived realistic threat toward the Xinyimin may stem from the fact that their province is home to “the most sizeable Chinese Indonesian community of Sumatra, and indeed anywhere outside Java,” and that the province’s capital, Medan, has the second-largest number of Chinese population (Arifin et al., 2017; Reid, 2004, p. 194). Their distinct demographic and historical background might have instilled in their upbringing a degree of cultural familiarity and knowledge of Chinese groups, including the Xinyimin, through various channels of communication, hence reducing their threat perceptions.

Communication serves as a vehicle for expressing prejudice and stereotypical beliefs and as an instrument to reduce or mitigate intergroup biases. Intergroup communication, in which ingroup and outgroup members learn about each other and dismantle negative stereotypes, can lead to more positive perceptions of the outgroup (Nshom, 2024). Governments, private sectors, and communication scholars should explore the extent to which fostering open communication can help reduce biases between the two groups. Stakeholders may want to consider such programmes as cooperative learning, reading and media interventions, and cross-cultural training to elicit effective effects on prejudice reduction (Paluck & Green, 2009).

### ***Limitations and future research***

This study has some limitations. In self-report surveys, participants may have either under-reported or over-reported the views they deemed to be socially desirable or undesirable (Oetzel, 1998). Future research may want to address this issue by administering the social desirability scale to evaluate the extent to which such a bias influences the study. Second, the symbolic threat measure, one of the key threat components, was removed due to the low Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  reliability. Future research may want to refine this measure or consider different approaches to fully capture how participants perceive symbolic threat, particularly in this population.

### **Notes**

1. Due to the low Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this measure is .35, symbolic threat measure was removed from data analysis.
2. CFA result for realistic threat demonstrated acceptable fit  $\chi^2(26) = 106.58$ ,  $p = .001$ , CFI = 0.97, GFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.58, PClose = 0.11. Realistic threat’s deleted items = 2,4,7. CFA result for history of intergroup conflict demonstrated acceptable fit  $\chi^2(2) = 29.86$ ,  $p = .001$ , CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.12. CFA result for contact demonstrated acceptable fit  $\chi^2(2) = 16.5$ ,  $p = .001$ , CFI = 0.95, GFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.09.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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