Review Essays

Indonesia’s Ethnic Chinese in National History: Three Recent Studies

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* Following the onset of political reform in the country nearly fifteen years ago, Indonesia’s ethnic Chinese have gradually emerged from political obscurity and have become the subject of an increasing number of books. The screen placed over a significant part of the country’s history for three decades during Soeharto’s New Order rule has slowly lifted, straightening up numerous distortions and erasing stereotypical images created during the New Order times.

Three recent publications attest to this broadening of the picture depicting the country’s ethnic Chinese.
In Manifesto Politik Tionghoa di Indonesia, Choirul Mahfud first steps back in history and retraces the presence of the Chinese in the archipelago since as early as the eighth century. In doing so Mahfud also explores how over the centuries they interacted with, and integrated into, local communities. The Chinese, Mahfud concludes, had been there long before Indonesia as a nation was founded, and for that reason alone, the present ethnic Chinese who hold Indonesian citizenship should be automatically accepted into Indonesian society, the same way as other ethnic groups are who form the Republic of Indonesia.

These interactions and integrations were continuously disturbed, even undermined, by local and state policies. Mahfud marks the turn of the century as a significant time for the Chinese as they were now politically visible. However since the Dutch colonial administration set the Chinese aside from other races, legally, physically and socially they were still marginalized from the mainstream pre-nationalist movement.

A number of local-born Chinese who were publicly vocal such as Liem Koen Hian, exhorted their fellow Chinese to be part of the nascent Indonesian nation and join the struggle for independence. Post-independence years saw the Chinese actively participating in politics, using Indonesian as the main language of communication, and adopting other national attributes in both public and private.

Chinese communities in Indonesia were not a monolithic presence, as the book carefully details. Apart from particular differences among themselves, the early years of twentieth century saw growing tension between the pro-Dutch Chung Hwa Hwee group and the pro-China Sin Po group, the latter regarding as an insult that the Chinese were classified as ‘subjects’ (onderdaan) but not full ‘citizens’. It was not surprising that this group was impressed when the government in China was beginning to pay attention to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, handing out scholarships to those deemed as deserving to study in China. The conflict between the two groups would flare up from time to time. In a 1917 conference in Semarang for instance, the two clashed head-on over the colonial administration’s intention to recruit Chinese to the Volksraad (legislative council) without giving them any law-making power, yet making military service compulsory. Moreover, they were still barred from owning land. This was not lost on the pro-Dutch group, though they stood their ground because they did not think that the Chinese would fare better with China either.
In *Manifesto*, Mahfud painted a comprehensive picture of the ethnic Chinese scenes: the drives behind their arrivals, the ways different ruling powers treated them, how they have addressed the difficult situations arising out of these, and the ethnic Chinese community’s prospects in Indonesia’s future. Mahfud unreservedly includes ethnic Chinese in Indonesia’s multicultural society, though their exclusion and marginalized status has deep roots.

That the Dutch colonial administration discriminated against the Chinese during its rule is clearly illustrated in Iskandar Jusuf’s *Dari Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan 1900 sampai Sekolah Terpadu Pahoa 2008*, which focuses on the realm of education.

Having been sidelined in all education policies by the colonial administration, the Chinese (whose population grew in the period of 1870-1930 from 50,000 to more than a million) were faced with the challenge of having to address the situation themselves and found their own educational institutions; thus Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan, an organization commonly known as THHK, was formed in 1900, and its first school opened in 1901. While there had been a modern Dutch school for Chinese children, privately founded by a group of local-born Chinese in 1892, THHK was the first school to use Mandarin as the language of instruction. Since the school was founded in a Batavia locality of Patekoan, it was referred to by its abbreviated name ‘Pa Hoa’. However, THHK did not stop there. In the same year it also founded a school with English as the language of instruction, which it named the ‘Yale Institute’. Five years after that a decision was made to merge the two schools together, and Pa Hoa would then teach English to its students. The schools incorporated Confucius teachings and values in their curriculum. It is worth noting that the success of THHK schools in the Dutch East Indies coincided with Sun Yat Sen’s campaign to overthrow the Ching (Manchu) Dynasty in China, perceived as foreign by the overwhelmingly Han population. This campaign generated a great deal of nationalist fervour among many Chinese in the East Indies who had felt slighted by the colonial administration’s educational policy. In line with this new pride, THHK began the move to drop the term ‘Tjina’ used by colonial authorities, and replace it with ‘Tionghoa’ to refer to themselves. By instilling the pride of being part of a great nation of China, THHK also hoped to close the chasm between the local-born Chinese and those who had recently migrated.
Petitions by THHK to the education authorities to subsidize their teachers’ salaries were repeatedly rejected. Significantly, it was the Chinese government—the Ching Dynasty—which showed greatest interest in supporting the schools, and this had some curious effects. The exponential growth of THHK establishment jolted the colonial administration into paying more attention to the education of its Chinese subjects, in order not to lose them all to allegiance to China. So in 1908 the colonial administration agreed to found Hollandsche Chineesche School or the HCS. By 1925 THHK schools had initiated a trilingual educational system in Indonesia, when it adopted Dutch as the third language in its curriculum.

Throughout the decades after Indonesia’s independence, THHK schools reflected the struggle of the country’s Chinese to belong to the new nation; to be accepted as one of the ethnic groups which form Indonesia. In 1957, the THHK school was split into two systems, one for the Chinese who held foreign citizenships, while the other for those who were citizens of the new republic, the latter being named Jajasan Pendidikan dan Pengadjaran or JPP. And further political turmoil and manoeuvring saw the closure of the Pahooa wing while the JPP wing survived. Both came to an end in 1965. Only in 2008, after concerted efforts of unrelenting and untiring believers, was Pahooa revived, as Sekolah Terpadu (Integrated School of) Pahooa.

The third book, Chinese Indonesians Reassessed, a collection of essays edited by Siew-Min Sai and Chang-Yau Hoon, paints the current development of the ethnic Chinese by bringing in a number of aspects, which altogether provides an interesting tableau.

Adding another dimension to Iskandar Jusuf’s perspective on the THHK school, Didi Kwartanada places his focus on its connections outside the Dutch East Indies and its representation of new modernity at the time, when the conventional modernity was a concept closely associated with Dutch social and cultural image. The school strove to raise the image of the Chinese, painted as ‘evil’ in Dutch colonial literature. THHK’s connections in the fields of curricula, teacher recruitment, and funding included not only Be Ing Tjoe and Oei Tiong Ham both of Semarang but spread as far afield as Singapore and Japan.

Siew-Min Sai explores the fascination of Nanyang (Southeast Asia) in the Chinese collective psyche as the destination and setting of their dreams. While the area indeed received a large slice of the diaspora from China, there was a serious shortage of appropriate textbooks and teaching
materials about the regions that were suitable for Chinese-medium schools outside China. This may partially explain why for a long time many Chinese migrants and their descendants failed to form personal and cultural links with the local cultures where they lived; they never truly knew these cultures. So instead they maintained a persistent sense of belonging to China despite the fact that some had never been to the country.

Today, Chinese Indonesians have made a dramatic reappearance on Indonesian cinema screens. They are no longer confined to the roles of producers, financiers, and distributors. They are now the subjects of the stories. Moreover, the more recent films have moved away from ideological issues to more cosmopolitan themes such as love, faith and fear, as Charlotte Setiyadi observes in Chapter 3.

Other interesting subjects in the book recount stories of transformation of Chinese properties, notably of Chinese schools, as history progressed, as well as a case study of a Chinese man born in Pemangkat, West Kalimantan, emotionally suspended between his real homeland Pemangkat and the imagined one, Shanghai. Other themes draw attention to successful cultural interaction and fusion. Chapter 6 tells of natural integration of Chinese families in Karimun into the local communities. Chapter 7 is a very intriguing study of the spirit-mediums of West Kalimantan’s Singkawang. These entities are indeed a mixture and fusion of Dayak, Malay, and Chinese earth-gods, as showcased in Capgomeh (fifteen days after Chinese New Year) ceremonies and performances. Chapters 9 and 10 describe the roles of Chinese Indonesians in the various Muslim communities in the country.

These three books offer only a sample of the wealth of literature on Chinese Indonesians currently and increasingly available, not only in English, but also in Indonesian, written by Indonesian scholars and social political observers.