
One remarkable phenomenon that signified modernity among the Chinese in Java in the late nineteenth century was the birth of dandies. The Chinese were not permitted to wear Western clothing—quoting the renowned author Gouw Peng Liang (2000: 136), this was known as “wearing European outfits” (*pake pakean Eropa*)—and a violation of this rule would lead to punishment. However, Chinese gentlemen donning Western dress were common in Batavia in the 1890s, as described by the American traveler Eliza Ruhamah Scidmore (1897: 38–39): “Chinese conservatism yields first in costume and social manners; the pigtail shrinks to a mere symbolic wisp, and the well-to-do Batavian Chinese dresses faultlessly after the London model, wears spotless duck coat and trousers, patent-leather shoes, and in top or derby hat ...”

This period indeed witnessed the emergence of a new generation of Chinese, the so-called “Young Chinese” (*kaoem moeda bangsa Tjina*), who came to see themselves as the “enlightened” Chinese of urban colonial Java. These *kaoem moeda* dandies were the torchbearers of progress (*kemadjoean*) within their community in colonial Indonesia. This view is echoed by an observation from Rudolf Mrazek (2002: 132): “Much more than in the West, progress in the colony was identified with fashion.” Chinese dandyism cultivated what Fillin-Yeh (2001) described as a “resistance to norms” character, which challenged Chinese conservatism and flaunted Dutch dress codes intended to control multiracial subjects.

Indeed, rebellious attitudes are a major feature of the *kaoem moeda*, as Tom Hoogervorst delightfully elaborates in the book under review. *Language Ungoverned* examines how the Sino-Malay patois defied linguistic and political governance of the Dutch colonial rule. Hoogervorst successfully provides new insights on how Chinese entrepreneurial flair facilitated a “subversive role of language” through various print media: novels, periodicals, educational materials, poetry and plays (p. 3). He shows how this language of rebels went beyond the authority’s control: it was ungoverned.

According to Kumar and Proudfoot (1996: 201–212), the literacy level of local-born Chinese (*Peranakan*) in Java in the late nineteenth century was marked by two main characteristics. Firstly, there were few Peranakan who could read Chinese characters, because they were considered difficult. Secondly, against this background, it was not surprising that Peranakan preferred to read and enjoy vernacular literature, whether in Jawi (Arabic) Malay or Javanese.
ever, a great transformation in literacy skills took place after 1856 in Java’s major port cities of Batavia, Semarang, and Surabaya, when the Peranakan shifted from vernaculars and Jawi to the Roman alphabet, as Claudine Salmon clearly showed in her influential annotated bibliography (1981: 15–33). The adoption of Malay in the Roman alphabet as a medium for written expression and communication—and the acquisition of Dutch and/or other Western languages—paved the way for the modern. A substantial new generation of literates in Roman script appears to have emerged around the 1870s. The Peranakan’s capital involvement in the printing business in the 1880s provided a medium for the kaoem moeda to express and disseminate their ideas.

Print capitalism prompted the widespread use of the Roman alphabet. Handy spelling booklets called Kitab Edja A.B.C gained popularity in the 1870s. One of the most influential Peranakan literati, Lie Kim Hok (1853–1912), significantly wrote his first three books (between the 1870s–1880s) on how to read the alphabet. By about 1890, as noted by Kumar and Proudfoot (1996: 208), the increasing numbers of Peranakan whose literary language of choice was Malay could now read it only in Roman script. This triple alliance between literacy, the alphabet, and the printing press contributed to the making of romanized Malay ecumene in the archipelago.

While books on the Chinese in Indonesia are numerous, Language Ungoverned presents a very much overlooked topic in this inventory: the linguistic embedding of the Peranakan as a liminal or in-between group. Consisting of five chapters, the main argument of this book “is that a linguistic reading of vernacular texts—placing language in conversation with history and culture—is key to make sense of the society that slowly transformed into Indonesia, and the position therein of its Chinese minority” (p. 2). This is a new approach, offered by a promising historical linguist from the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies. From the very beginning, Hoogervorst reminds us that we overlook crucial information whenever we ignore the original Malay texts. Depending on English translations alone, readers can never fully appreciate the original texts and inevitably fail to understand the context (p. 2).

Polyglossic Chinese writers had found a new ultimate weapon in romanized Malay, and “they started to forge new realities in it, reverberating far beyond their own cities and communities. They set the stage for competing articulations of modernity, purposefully strip-mining the linguistic resources of Malay, Hokkien, Dutch, and other languages” (p. 152). It is very likely that their writings were consumed by all races (segala bangsa). One example is the library of Taman Siswa Museum in Jogjakarta, which stored Sino-Malay novels from...
the private collections of Ki Hadjar Dewantara (the founder of Taman Siswa Schools and therefore the father of Indonesian education).

I personally found Chapter 5 to be the most entertaining chapter to read during this stressful pandemic time. Hoogervorst writes “the true power of vernacular Malay resided in its endless possibilities for humor and playfulness, away from the wrath of colonial administrators, language purists, and elitist intelligentsia [...] Chinese print entrepreneurs consciously prioritized the colloquial over the official, the translingual over the homogenous, and the subversive over the hegemonic. By knitting together contents and style, they had become the paladins of word-juggling” (p. 125). This word-juggling is best explained in various cartoons (see, for instance, figure 5.1 on p. 131) and advertisements (see figure 1.1 on p. 26) in the book. It shows that Sino-Malay texts also intermeshed with the language of visuality (p. 152).

Finally, what is the point of discussing and problematizing these Malay texts? The author gives an answer: “Foremost, the Sino-Malay print culture—and comparable material from other contexts—provides insights into lives that did not necessarily intersect with those of Europeans. In many cases, they tell a fuller, more textured story of the period in which they appeared” (p. 157).

While I found this book highly enjoyable, I offer a small note to the publisher. The letters are too small, and get even smaller in the footnotes. As such, it is not easy to read for middle aged readers.

To conclude, this seminal work has approached “ungoverned” Malay “as a counterforce to the dictates of colonialism, the nation-state, and conventional wisdom [...] Vernacular Malay was crucial for Indonesia’s public sphere to develop and for its middle classes to catch the pace of modernity. It caused an efflorescence of pleasure in reading and writing” (p. 153). These are the reasons why a translation of this book into Bahasa Indonesia is badly needed, especially in the age of hoaxes in contemporary Indonesia, where the Chinese are too often seen as having made no contribution to the country where they have lived for generations.

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