Malang mignon
Cultural expressions of the Chinese, 1940-1960
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Malang, a hilly resort town in East Java, was from the 1950s to the 1960s a city alive with arts and cultural performances.¹ Born in the 1950s and raised in a peranakan (culturally assimilated Chinese) culture that nurtured the taste for traditional dances and theatre, my three sisters and I were avid consumers of, and sometimes amateur participants in, the city’s cultural festivities.² My father, as a board member of the Malang branch of an association of cigarette companies (Gabungan Perusahaan Rokok or GAPERO), often got free tickets to the best shows in town.³ Cigarette companies – along with other businesses owned by the Chinese – were regular patrons of such activities. There was a rich variety from which to choose, from our most favourite wayang orang Ang Hien Hoo, traditional Javanese theatre owned and played by the peranakan Chinese, to ludruk (a comic popular theatre form from East Java) and the Chinese puppet shows at the Malang Chinese temple. Modern and traditional dances from all parts of Indonesia, as well as ballet and folk dances from many countries were performed in cultural nights sponsored by the many competing political parties and cultural organizations.

Towards the mid-1960s, however, when the ideological competition between right-wing and left-wing politics was on the rise, we

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² Of the seven children in our family, four of the five girls were born in the 1950s (1950, 1951, 1954, 1957).
³ Tan Hong Bok (born in Pare 1919) moved to Malang in 1947 and served in the management of Toegoemas cigarette company, was board member of the Association of Cigarette Companies (Gabungan Perusahaan Rokok, GAPERO) in Malang, and member of the advisory board of a number of Catholic social and educational foundations in Malang in the 1950s-1960s.
learned that stepping into cultural festivals of a wrong camp could lead to an uneasy situation. One night, my three sisters and I were attending one cultural festival that showed lively dances of fishermen, farmers at harvest, and Chinese folk dances. What we did not expect was that after every performance, the crowds would stand up and yell, shouting things like, ‘long live President Soekarno’ or ‘long live Chairman Mao’, and other apparently rehearsed political yells with appropriate gestures of raised fists, with which we were not familiar. Embarrassed, we remained glued to our chairs and got nasty stares from the audience. We left early that night.

This essay is a part of my intellectual quest to reconstruct the cultural dynamics of the Malang Chinese in their hey-day in the 1950s and their critical transition in mid-1960s. It aims to understand the context and forces that shaped the diverse cultural articulation, the complex tensions and fusion of culture and politics at the time, and the marked shift after the country was shaken by the 1965 political upheaval. This is a social and cultural history with small caps. Cultural festivals and performances by the Chinese were mostly urban pastimes, which were not intended as highbrow artistic achievements. So far, what I have amassed – patches of personal memories of hobby-club members and networks of friendship that continued despite ideological differences – amounts to snapshots of everyday life in a small town.