Review Essays

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

Dewi Anggraeni
Monash University
djuta2003@yahoo.com.au


Iskandar Jusuf, Dari Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan 1900 sampai Sekolah Terpadu 2008. [Publisher unidentified], 2012, 202 pp. [Supporting preface by Didi Kwartanada, Nabil Foundation.] (paperback).


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.