
REVIEW ESSAY

Christian Chua. *Chinese Big Business in Indonesia: The State of Capital.* London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2008. 192 pp.

Chang-Yau Hoon. *Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia: Culture, Politics and Media.* Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2008. 230 pp.

Jemma Purdey

Read together, these books do not, in their conclusions, fill one with great expectation or hope for a stable and harmonious future for the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. Such an assessment will perhaps be surprising for some, including many ethnic Chinese themselves who, relative to previous conditions, have over the past ten years enjoyed greater freedom to express their religious, ethnic, and cultural identity, and benefited from improved legal rights as Indonesian citizens. Hoon and Chua examine the situation of ethnic Chinese Indonesians from different scholarly perspectives and disciplines, the cultural on the one hand (Hoon) and the commercial on the other (Chua). Nevertheless, the close and inextricable link between “Chineseness” in Indonesia and the economic activities of this ethnic minority means that the work of these authors shares a great deal in common, not least in their final deductions. Both arrive at a similar position about the continued vulnerability of this ethnic minority, a vulnerability that has dominated the experience of Chinese in Indonesia for centuries.

Hoon’s study is deeply concerned with how Chinese Indonesians see themselves, their multiple identities, and how they negotiate those in Indonesia today. For Hoon, the continued vulnerability of the Chinese minority in post-New Order Indonesia rests with stereotypes based on essentialized ideas and perceptions of “Chineseness” and associated anti-Chinese prejudices, which persist in the general community. As he sees it, “Even though new space has been created by the policy of multiculturalism for the free expression of Chineseness, it does not necessarily guarantee the acceptance of this minority by the non-Chinese majority” (p. 182). Hoon’s investigation, based on group and individual surveys, interviews, and observations conducted more than five years after the end of the New Order, reveals that the dominant view or stereotype of the “Chinese” held by *pribumi* (native, or “inlander”) Indonesians is largely unchanged. As

he argues, the “cultural stuff” matters little with regard to the maintenance of ethnic identity; rather, that identity is sustained by the boundary between “them” and “us.” So it is that Chinese Indonesians continue to be regarded as *pendatang* (new arrivals) and *penumpang* (passengers), regardless of how many generations have lived in the archipelago and how “assimilated” they have become. Importantly, however, Hoon also goes to lengths to stress that responsibility for this persistence rests, too, with the Chinese themselves, including those he terms its “cultural gatekeepers.” These mostly older members of the community continue to cling to their Chineseness as if it were frozen in time, ignoring the reality of the hybridity and multiplicity of Chinese identities in Indonesia today. Such rigidity may be counterproductive to the activities and perceptions of a younger generation of Chinese Indonesians agitating for a less homogenized view of their own identities.

Hoon’s informants are from the large Chinese middle class—students, housewives, activists, media workers, and community leaders. Many of them are among his friends, colleagues, and peers. By contrast, Christian Chua’s research presents a study of a separate and exclusive group of ethnic Chinese Indonesians to whom it is extremely difficult to gain access but whose influence on public opinion and perceptions of Chineseness are immense. These are the hyper-wealthy, super-rich Chinese conglomerate owners or “big business” types who, during the New Order period, prospered under Suharto’s regime of corruption, nepotism, and autocratic rule. Chua gives a detailed study of these business executives’ relations with that regime and their subsequent endeavors. He argues against those who, in the wake of the fall of the New Order, heralded an end to the Chinese conglomerates as they faced a democratic system considered to be incompatible with their methods of business. Rather, Chua demonstrates that these companies’ owners and managers have discovered new opportunities within a system in which individuals in the elite ranks of politics, the bureaucracy, the military, and business have changed little and in which the institutions of democracy—political and judicial—remain weak.

Both books present a similar literature survey and historical summary of the state of the Chinese in Indonesia, focusing especially on the contemporary New Order and “reformasi” periods. They both outline the ways in which the New Order regime used existing anti-Chinese sentiments when a scapegoat was necessary, and also engaged the economic capacities of Chinese businesses, exploiting them for mutual benefit in terms of development and wealth accumulation, and, for the Chinese, also for necessary protection and security. As previous studies of the Chinese in Indonesia have explained, the state’s institutionalized “othering” created boundaries around this ethnicity and also generated an easily rousable anti-Chinese sentiment in the wider population. Anti-Chinese prejudice is based on stereotypes that, as Hoon’s study very clearly confirmed, continue to persist in democratic Indonesia today: perceptions of all Chinese as wealthy, arrogant, corrupt, and selfish. After reading Hoon’s comprehensive and convincing observations and analysis of the contemporary realities facing Chinese Indonesians, Chua’s study is somewhat spine-chilling. This close study focuses on the very relationships between Chinese big business and government that for decades, under the New Order, fuelled precisely those very stereotypes. In the eyes of the disenfranchised and impoverished masses, such impressions and prejudices were confirmed again and again with each conspicuous display of “new” wealth and cozy deals made with the regime. In arguing against and, indeed, disproving any

expectation that Chinese conglomerates would not survive in post-New Order democratic Indonesia, Chua's analysis of the operations and methods adopted by these companies after 1998 reveals a great deal that should be of concern to Hoon's activist Chinese Indonesians working to debunk essentialising stereotypes.

As Chua and other Indonesia watchers have observed, democracy and a free market in Indonesia have not been backed up by adequate reforms to its judicial and other law-and-order institutions, nor by regulatory bodies governing commerce. Moreover, many of the individuals from within the machinery of the New Order regime remain in positions of power and influence in politics, the military, and business. As Chua, like van Klinken and others, argues,¹ the regionalization of government has indeed created more and diverse opportunities for businesses, politicians, bureaucrats, and military leaders to engage in mutually beneficial arrangements. Chua points out that the contacts Chinese conglomerates made as a consequence of their close relations with the New Order continue to be useful, although, ironically, the businessmen now have the upper hand in most deals. Chua paints a picture of Chinese conglomerates continuing to behave badly in post-New Order Indonesia and, indeed, doing so to an even greater extent than was possible within the limits of these companies' "arrangements" with Suharto and his cronies. As Chua sees it, capitalism in Indonesia is on the way (if it hasn't already got there) to preeminence and Chinese business is poised to reap the rewards. The probability that this prediction will be fulfilled for the future of Indonesia's political economy aside, Chua's analysis of the resilience of the Chinese Indonesian conglomerates and their uncompromising arrogance regarding their right to exploit the nation's resources and circumvent its regulatory and legal authority (weak as it is) does not bode well for the fate of Chinese Indonesians as a group. Indeed, as Hoon's surveys and interviews of both Chinese and *pribumi* Indonesians show us, in spite of gains regarding cultural freedoms and legal equality, it is the challenge of shifting individuals' opinions and prejudices that is the greatest obstacle for this minority ethnic group. Whilst Hoon points to the (albeit well-intentioned) "cultural gatekeepers" together with the persistence of stereotypes passed by generation to generation, he reminds us that the boundaries between ethnic Chinese and *pribumi* Indonesians continue to be as solid as ever. Chua's Chinese conglomerates play a very large and largely detrimental part (as they did during the New Order) in rendering futile any efforts to remove such boundaries and alter the nation's perceptions of the "ethnic Chinese." In the face of ongoing and massive wealth accumulation, exploitation, and corruption by the Chinese conglomerates, how can a grassroots, anti-discrimination, non-government organization, or even a national political candidate, make an impact that is significant enough to carry out the necessary mind-shift in the national psyche?

In the 1998 violence, the properties, businesses, and, indeed, the very images of conglomerates like those controlled by the Salim family and the Lippo group were directly targeted for attack. Today these companies and individuals remain high-profile, overt representations of "Chineseness" for many Indonesians, and their business activities validate deeply rooted stereotypes. The continued and perhaps even heightened wealth accumulation and flouting of the rules (such as they exist), made

¹ Gerry van Klinken, *Communal Violence and Democratization in Indonesia: Small Town Wars* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2007). See the review of van Klinken's book in this issue of *Indonesia*.

possible by these companies' immense capital, will not go unnoticed. Perhaps much more than the persistence of outmoded notions pushed by the cultural gatekeepers of Chinese tradition and a clash between generations of Chinese Indonesians about how to express their hybrid identity, the Chinese conglomerates will do greater damage to any effort to change an essentialised view of Chineseness in Indonesia in the near future.

Vice-President Jusuf Kalla's occasional outbursts of anti-*pendatang* rhetoric and talk of affirmative action for *pribumi* entrepreneurs must be seen as partly responsible for any backlash. This leads, then, to a question about the merits (or effectiveness) of political activism based on the advocacy of anti-discrimination or in support of greater representation of Chinese in politics. As Hoon is quick to acknowledge, the "problem" associated with anti-Chinese prejudice and negative stereotyping in Indonesia cannot be solved within a generation, but requires a systematic and deep shift in the way the individual, ethnic group, and, indeed, the nation conceives of itself. A state of weak institutional government, in which business and politics continue to engage in methods unchanged from New Order times, with corruption and extra-legal activities carried out at the highest to the lowest levels in society, does not bode well for such change occurring soon.

At the heart of each of these studies, then, is a greater and complex question related to nationalism and patriotism. With respect to the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, it is a question as old as the Republic, but clearly still in need of answers. Does citizenship and legal equality equate to or prove one's nationalism? No one would take Chua's argument that "Chinese tycoons ... [are] ... at the centre of the nation" (p. 119) to mean that Chinese Indonesians are in any way at the center of Indonesian nationalism. Indeed, Hoon's own discomfort and that of some of his ethnic Chinese respondents with the erection of the "Chinese" pavilion within *Taman Mini Indonesia* is reflective of the ongoing uncertainties for Chinese Indonesians themselves about their place and identity within the conception of Indonesian nationhood.

* * *

The identities and provenance of these non-Indonesian ethnic Chinese authors provide a chance to reflect upon the ways in which a researcher's ability to cross boundaries influences the work she or he eventually produces. In recent times, the body of scholarship on the Chinese Indonesians by Chinese Indonesians themselves (see, for example, Heryanto, Budianta, Mely Tan, Thung Julian, and Christine Tjhin²). has grown, adding to the more established scholarship by Chinese Indonesians living elsewhere (for example, Suryadinata, Thee Siau-w Giap, Wang Gungwu, and Ien Ang³).

² Ariel Heryanto, "Ethnic Identities and Erasure: Chinese Indonesians in Public Culture," in *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand*, ed. Joel S. Kahn (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 95–114.; Melani Budianta, "The Dragon Dance: Shifting Meaning of Chineseness in Indonesia." in *Asian and Pacific Cosmopolitan: "Self" and "Subject" in Motion*, ed. Katherine Robinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Mely Tan, *Étnis Tionghoa di Indonesia: Kumpulan Tulisan* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2008); Thung Ju-lan, "Identities in Flux: Young Chinese in Jakarta," PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 1998; Christine Susana Tjhin, *Reflections on the Chinese Indonesians*, CSIS Working Paper, Jakarta, June 2005.

³ Leo Suryadinata, *Peranakan Chinese Politics in Java, 1917–1942* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981); The Siau-w Giap, "Group Conflict in a Plural Society, Anti-Chinese Riots in Indonesia: The

and by Westerners (for example, Coppel, Mackie, Blussé, Somers-Heidhues, Salmon, and Lombard⁴). Though not new, this category of work by non-Indonesian Chinese scholars (Aguilar⁵) appears also to be expanding. Hoon's study especially fits neatly into an emerging scholarship by overseas or ethnic Chinese exploring and studying "Chineseness." In the case of Hoon, and to a lesser extent Chua, their own individual journeys involve crossings of boundaries or borders; not from overseas Chinese back to China or from their place of exile to their birthplace, but into another hybrid environment altogether. Hoon's own personal experience as an ethnic Chinese Southeast Asian (Brunei), who is able to pass as a local ethnic Chinese, gives him a unique insight and point of view into what it is like to be Chinese in Indonesia, how these stereotypes work in the everyday, and the ways they influence behaviors. In a manner reminiscent of the work of Ien Ang,⁶ Hoon's own experiences are very much a part of his observer-participant style of research, and he draws on this to give his work a fresh and immediate perspective. For example, his direct experience of racialized bullying by *preman* (hoodlum, criminal) on a public bus demonstrated for the author "the helplessness of being Chinese in Indonesia" (p. 55). Likewise, Chua's own "hybrid" identity played a part in enabling him to carry out his research, although he is much less openly reflective about its impact. His comments on the subject are restricted to a footnote in reference to obtaining interviews with his respondents: "It helped that the businessmen regarded me as 'one of them' in terms of Chinese Indonesian ethnicity, that I am German, that I studied in Singapore, or that I was attached to the Centre of Strategic Studies—or a combination thereof. This, presumably, made me more trustworthy in their eyes" (p. 149, fn. 11). Coincidentally, Hoon also was for a period of his fieldwork connected to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), an organization that once had strong ties to the old regime and continues to be identified as "Chinese."

Sukabumi (1963) and Kudus (1918) incidents," *Revue du Sudest Asiatique* 2 (1966): 1–31; Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2001).

⁴ C. A. Coppel, "Chinese Indonesians in Crisis: 1960s and 1990s," in *Studying Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia* (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 2002), pp. 14–47; J. A. C. Mackie, ed., *The Chinese in Indonesia: Five Essays* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson in association with the Australian Institute of International Affairs, 1976); Leonard Blussé, *Strange Company: Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women, and the Dutch in VOC Batavia*. (Dordrecht and Riverton, NJ: Foris Publications, 1986); M. F. Somers, *Peranakan Chinese Politics in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University SEAP Modern Indonesia Project, 1964); Claudine Salmon and Denys Lombard, *The Chinese of Jakarta: Temples and Communal Life* (Guéret: SECMI, 1977).

⁵ Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr., "Citizenship, Inheritance and the Indigenising of 'Orang Chinese' in Indonesia," *Positions* 9,3 (Winter 2001): 501–33.

⁶ Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2001).