

REVIEW ESSAY

The Chinese in Indonesia

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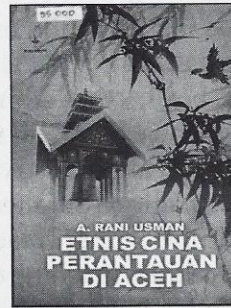
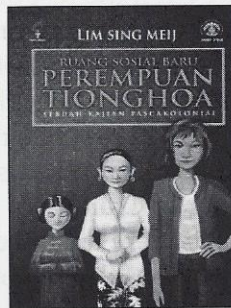
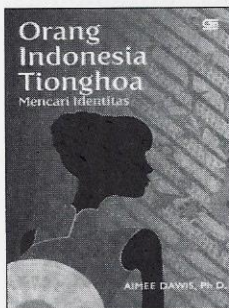
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Aimee Dawis, *Orang Indonesia Tionghoa mencari identitas*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2010, 276 pp. ISBN 978-979-22-5659-8. Price: IDR 60,000 (soft cover).

Lim Sing Meij, *Ruang sosial baru perempuan Tionghoa; Sebuah kajian pascakolonial*. Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2009, xviii + 212 pp. ISBN 9789794617274. Price: IDR 60,000 (soft cover).

A. Rani Usman, *Etnis Cina perantauan di Aceh*. Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2009, 432 pp. ISBN 978-979-461-708-3. Price: IDR 95.000 (soft cover).

Mely G. Tan, *Etnis Tionghoa Indonesia; Kumpulan tulisan*. Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2008, x + 314 pp. ISBN 978-979-461689-5, Price: IDR 63,000 (soft cover).



Although nowadays it is hard to identify many among them as Chinese, physically or culturally, to study the Chinese in Indonesia is always interesting because, as a social group, they carry an eternal historical burden. Their condition has also stimulated some of them, especially young intellectuals, to try to understand the reasons why their position among Indonesian society remains "problematic", both in non-Chinese eyes as well as in those of the

Chinese themselves.

Aimee Dawis addresses the quest for a Chinese-Indonesian identity and this departs from her own position. She spent most of her life abroad and never lived in Indonesia as an Indonesian Chinese (p. 48). It is for this reason that she sees her research to understand the relationship between collective memory and the media when Soeharto's New Order – for Melani Budianta, a period “full of dangers” – enforced its assimilation policies on the Indonesian Chinese (p. xi), as a process of “homecoming” although she is aware of the “dilemma” in claiming to be a “native ethnographer” at the same time (p. 47).

During focus group discussions (FGD), Aimee and her respondents engaged in “self reflection” on the various ways they “attained their cultural identity through reminiscing about the time when they grew up amidst a restrictive media environment” (p. 79). From these discussions, Aimee learned that “family relationships, religion, and origin (in Indonesia) influenced her respondent's Chineseness and the way they used the media when they grew up” (p. 79).

Although her respondents “abided by the policies that required them to give up an important part of the essence of their Chinese culture”, Aimee also learned from their stories that “they did not completely assimilate within the social order of the country”, because “certain norms and customs of the society still could not overcome the differences between them and non-Chinese Indonesians” (pp. 121-122).

However, if we pay close attention to what Yuny, one of Aimee's respondents said, “I did not play outdoors a lot because there were many local children in the kampong around our house [...]. The environment was thus not very conducive [...]. It was not conducive for me to socialize with children my age [...]. Moreover, I was a girl and I looked very different from them [...]. I was much whiter than they were [...]. So, I stood out whenever I left the house [...]” (p. 120), it becomes clear that physical difference seems to have been the first marker to set her aside from the rest of her surroundings. Unfortunately, Aimee insufficiently explores the more or less “fixed” social categorization and classification as a factor – or perhaps more aptly as “a limiting confinement box” – that stimulated her respondents to look for an “area without borders” by using their imagination while they were watching imported media (p. 130), although Aimee does indeed say that “imported media gave them an imagined safe feeling of China and places like Taiwan and Hong Kong as ‘desired other (places)’ where they need not fear for their safety” (p. 130). She sees their reaching out to the “desired other” more because of the discrimination her respondents experienced and thus that they harbour what she calls a “mental attitude of ‘inferiority and being wrong’” (p. 130). This means that imported media directly and indirectly were her respondents' means of “escape”. However, since they were aware that watching these media did not mean that they could relocate to the country of their dreams, Aimee concludes that, for her respondents, watching imported media was “more than a mere flight and imagination”. She views “these media as bridges

for social tensions between structural constraints and human conduct” (p. 203) through what she calls “imagined nostalgia”, although she thinks that, because of its complexity, this concept needs more study. The formation of their identity through their understanding of these imported media in fact revealed the local media’s lack of substance for the Chinese Indonesians’ search for identity. However, the media are not the only sources for the construction of Chinese identity.

Lim Sing Meij studies Chinese women and shows how, after the discriminative New Order policy had caused the closure of Chinese schools, media, and organizations, they gained access to higher education when their families changed their educational strategies and by so doing ultimately “created Chinese professional women” (p. 1). The professionalism that became part of their identity, according to Sing Meij, not only changed their Chinese identity, but also opened up a “new social space”, which had been closed to them because, similar to Indonesian women in general, traditionally they were confined to the private sphere at home (p. 1). However, Sing Meij is also aware that “Chinese women in contemporary life cannot escape their history” (p. 40). Through the study of the stories of six Chinese professional women, one accountant, one journalist, a notary, one dentist, and two humanity workers, Sing Meij concludes that education helped them to face “a variety of state and culture-based traditional violence” (p. 107). According to her, her respondents used a strategy she calls “Chinesewomenship” in order to “overcome cultural violence but not confrontationally” to “adopt a new, increasingly established identity” (p. 107). However, when we follow Sing Meij’s respondents’ narratives, it seems to have been a gradual process of change and initially, it was Christianization in elementary and high school that changed them, rather than higher education (pp. 92-93), as Sing Meij states of her respondents: “When they went to church, Muthia, Kartika, Nani, and Wati obtained spiritual benefit from listening to sermons in church, a benefit they did not derive from Confucianism [...]. As a young generation of Chinese, its members got their new identity through this new religion [...].” (p. 93). The process did not end here, however. When they reached the level of higher education, their religious convictions were shaken again. In Muthia’s words: “after I read Max Weber and found that his idea of capitalism originated in Protestantism, my God, my faith was seriously shaken. Apparently the community of love and compassion was just nonsense” (p. 97). They experienced this kind of upheavals because, as Sing Meij explains, “Their identity as members of a church that did not pay too much attention to ethnicity [...] *temporarily* gave new hope to them who had always been considered as ‘the others’” (p. 93, italicized by the present author). This means that what Sing Meij considers as becoming Christian as “a search process in the formation of Chinese professional women’s new culture” cannot simply be interpreted as a way “to seek a shelter in Christianity, because in the next phase they were still in the process of becoming convinced of each individual’s different religious faith” (pp. 96-99). If, according to Sing Meij, Chinese professional women’s strategy to open ‘a space’ for themselves was

through "a new, ever growing' identity", thus she too quickly concludes that there are "many abortive theories about Chinese >< non-Chinese; Chinese >< indigenous' perceptions" (p. 20), or even that:

The capability of Chinese professional women to understand and to decide among the various options in front of them can provide us with a picture about the extent to which they are accepted in a non-Chinese environment. They carefully selected the opportunities open to them. In this way, they could not only be accepted in their environment, but they could also display their intellectual qualities. Apart from that, they could also negate some of the discourse on the binary opposition Chinese >< non Chinese; indigenous, non-indigenous that was forced upon them by the authorities through the power of language' (p. 20).

She based her conclusion on Ima's experiences. She is a public accountant who also works as a teacher in non-Chinese circles. In principle, they are her individual experiences and they can hardly be taken up as Chinese women's collective experiences as reflected in the statement above. Although Sing Meij states in the first part that her "analysis and her research findings are only valid for the six Chinese professional women [of her study] and that her research cannot be generalized in order to provide a picture of Chinese women in general" (p. 41), it is clear that her generalization becomes evident in many places in her book. For instance, on p. 177, we find another of her "generalizing" conclusions:

To define a postcolonial Indonesian identity for Chinese women is a definition of 'space' in a double sense. Indonesia is a historical imaginary and political space in the daily life of Chinese women. Both spaces run parallel to experiences of social injustice and discrimination, experiences of being the "other".

In this case, she has probably forgotten to re-emphasize her own statement that her conclusions are based on the experiences of the six women she studied, so that her statement should be modified as follows:

To define a postcolonial Indonesian identity for the six women mentioned above is a definition of 'space with a double meaning [...].

Every Indonesian-Chinese citizen's "space" may be defined as having a double meaning and not only that of Chinese women, or for Sing Meij's six respondents. For instance, when reading A. Rani Usman's *Etnis Cina perantauan di Aceh*, we see that the Chinese in Aceh basically differentiate two "spaces", which they understand differently. Rani Usman calls this the "dual identity" of the Chinese in Banda Aceh he studied: Indonesian national/local and their own cultural identity reflected by their "family names" (Chinese names that mention the name of their clan at the start) and their "national name" (their Indonesian name as mentioned on their identity card) (p. 334). This dualism is manifest in their cultural conduct. On the one hand "they live in a Chinese sphere and they are proud of their people", but on the other they also "identify with Aceh as Indonesian citizens living in Aceh. This means that

they have local ties with the place they were born [...] and when they leave to find their luck outside their region they consider themselves as Acehnese, that is, Aceh Chinese" (pp. 338-339). The Acehness of these Aceh Chinese is predominantly revealed in their fluency in the Acehnese language. A. Rani Usman provides the following example of Ahsan. "As ethnic Chinese born and living in Aceh", "apart from being able to speak Acehnese he also behaves like an Acehnese person because he interacts with Acehnese everyday" (p. 332). In other words, for Aceh Chinese, there is a "Chinese social space" that comprises of the private and public spheres and an "Acehnese social space" limited to the public sphere.

Based on his findings, A. Rani Usman concludes that there are two different "sojourner Chinese identities" in Aceh which, in his view, form a "model for the identity manipulation of the Chinese toward Aceh society" (p. 354). For this, he adopts the model Wang Gungwu constructed in 1991 for the identity of Malaysian Chinese. Wang divided this identity into two currents: one, with a "political emphasis" aimed at "ethnic (racial) identity emphasizing legal and political rights for a minority in the country", and secondly, with "cultural emphasis" aimed at the "ethnic (cultural) identity with emphasis on preservation and unique cultural characteristics" (p. 355). This is maybe the reason why the Aceh Chinese fill the public domain with two, different identities, which A. Rani clearly sees as a process of "identity manipulation".

This situation, as also vented by A. Rani Usman, is connected with state policies towards minorities such as the Chinese. Unfortunately, in his book of no less than 421 pages he does not explain how state policies influence intercultural communication patterns, and subsequently influence the "identity manipulation" process of his informants. His discussion focuses more on the extent to which the Chinese in Aceh have assimilated into the local and national culture. He concludes that "identity manipulation" is the "output" of an assimilation process and is a "sign" that the Chinese in Aceh are not yet fully "assimilated". He therefore concludes his book with the following expectation: "It would be best if the Chinese would adapt to the local culture where they live and thrive [...]. It is expected that in the future there will be interethnic marriages so that a cultural and ethnic plural society will ensue [...]. It is expected that identity manipulation will not occur to ensure harmonious communication in society" (p. 365).

Apart from their varying themes, the discussions in the three books discussed above show that the Chinese in Indonesia face complex and varied problems. This complexity is in fact rooted in the century-long history of the arrival of the Chinese in Indonesia and their life there. Mely G. Tan has summarized this historical background, from the Dutch colonial times through the New Order and up to the Reformation era by using various themes (Chinese Muslims, Chinese dietary culture, Chinese business, Chinese Identity, New Order Linguistic and Political Engineering, Gender-based Violence, et cetera) in her book *Etnis Tionghoa di Indonesia; Kumpulan tulisan* (2008), introduced

by Charles Coppel, the author of the famous book *Indonesian Chinese in crisis* published in the 1970s. The articles in this collection tend to be unconnected, among others because of the large variety of topics but also because the articles have not been presented in chronological order (2004, 2001, 1990, 1998, 2002, 2001, 1997, 2000, 1999, 2004, 2000 and 1994). Nevertheless in their entirety, as Charles Coppel points out, they reveal the change in Mely G. Tan's person after the 1998 May crisis from: "an observer seemingly detached from those she describes and analyses" to "a more engaged stance as a participant, who shows her empathy for the victims of violence, especially women". Apart from that, her attention also shifted from "the question of assimilation" (especially illustrated in the third article on pages 48-71) to "discrimination and how to end it" (pp. ix-x). This change is also indirectly acknowledged in the postscript she added to the fourth article: "A minority group embracing the majority religion; The ethnic Chinese Muslims in Indonesia". In it, she acknowledges that she was shocked by the May 1998 events because only a month before she had thought assimilation through religion to be a possibility. As she says: "[h]ence, no one expected the outburst and no one had taken any precautions" (p. 86). In another part she also says she was shocked by the May 1998 events in Jakarta because, for her: "[t]here is no doubt that these events were the least expected to occur in Jakarta, but turned out to be the most horrifying" (p. 212), especially as she used to think that "people in Jakarta [...] were always assured by the civil and military authorities that Jakarta was the best guarded city in Indonesia and that no disturbances would happen" (p. 212). The ninth article, entitled "The ethnic Chinese in Indonesia; Trials and tribulations" especially sketches what she calls "many anguished questions raised by the ethnic Chinese [including the author herself!] and other concerned Indonesians in the aftermath of the May riots" (p. 210). It is clear that Mely, with other Chinese, has been "awoken" by the event to change her attitude from what she calls an "attitude of compliance" to "an attitude of greater assertiveness, expressed in more active participation in political activities" (p. 218), a fact that ultimately has seen the emergence of many more authors who write about the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, like Aimee Dawis, Lim Sing Meij, and A. Rani Usman.
