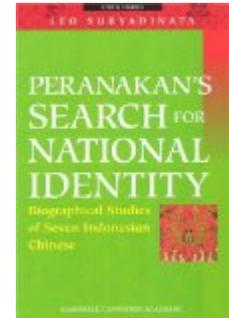


Leo Suryadinata. *Peranakan's Search for National Identity: Biographical Studies of Seven Indonesian Chinese.* Ethnic Studies Series. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2004. xi + 162 pp. \$22.00, paper, ISBN 978-981-210-361-1.



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Nationalism came late to the Southeast Asian islands that are now called Indonesia. As nationalist movements sprang up in the early twentieth century, local ethnic-Chinese communities in Indonesia were faced with multiple identities to choose from. As the concept of nation was emerging, they had to choose which nation was theirs. Were they subjects of the Dutch East Indies; Chinese living overseas; Indonesian; or something else entirely? The debate was most central for the *peranakan*, ethnic-Chinese communities settled in Indonesia who spoke local languages, mainly Malay (Indonesian), rather than any Chinese dialect.

Leo Suryadinata uses seven biographical sketches of Chinese-Indonesians in order to examine the identity question as it developed over a full century. Suryadinata has published extensively in Indonesian and English on Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. This book, like others in Marshall Cavendish's Ethnic Studies series, examines the contested and multiple identities of Chinese and Malay/Indonesian communities in Southeast Asia. These "Sino-Malay encounters"

(in Wang Gungwu's phrase) have received little attention from scholars concerned with identity and diasporic nationalism.[1] It seems appropriate that the encounters are the focus of a series published in Singapore, often described as a "Chinese island" sandwiched between Indonesia and Malaysia in a "Malay Sea."

Ethnic Chinese account for less than 3 percent of the Indonesian population. Unlike neighboring Malaysia, they are not seen as a demographic threat to the indigenous majority population. Yet they have importance out of proportion to their numbers, for reasons rooted in the pre-independence period.

The Netherlands East Indies formed the most important piece of the Dutch colonial empire. They produced resources beginning with the spice trade and continuing into the mining and oil extraction operations of the present day. The Indies were also integrated into a Southeast Asian regional trading system well before the coming of the Dutch. During the colonial period, migrants and traders from southern China came to the Indies, often settling to take up local jobs. Suryadi-

nata's subjects are the *peranakan*, the descendants of mostly male traders who settled in Java and intermarried with local women. He does not explore the equally interesting story of ethnic Chinese settlers who came to fill colonial demands for labor in outlying islands like Borneo (Kalimantan).

In the early twentieth century, the Indies were part of an Asia-wide upsurge in nationalism. Native nationalists took the anthropological term "Indonesia" (islands of the Indies) and re-deployed it as a political name for their country. They asserted a single new national identity, Indonesian, to replace the varied local identities followed for most of the colonial period, and demanded independence for the new nation they were working to bring into being. Indonesian nationalists declared independence in 1945, and won Dutch recognition of that independence in 1949.[2]

This is the context for Suryadinata's collection of short biographical essays. Given this background, and the global rise in nationalism, how did Chinese-Indonesians, and specifically the *peranakan*, choose to self-identify? As the author explains, their responses varied widely. Suryadinata's failure to provide much context, coupled with a collection of essays that were each meant to stand alone, forces the reader to identify for herself or himself the threads that tie this book together. In my reading, the central question for the *peranakan* profiled in this book was: where did their homeland lie?

The seven men profiled here gave very different answers. Each was shaped by their environment and times. The *peranakan* had given little thought to questions of identity before the rise of nationalism in both China and Indonesia in the early twentieth century. Movements like Sun Yat-sen's Goumindang (National Party) sought local control and democracy for China, but their origins in a movement to democratize and modernize the Qing Empire meant they operated among

overseas Chinese communities, especially in Southeast Asia and North America.[3]

The call of Chinese nationalism led to the creation of the Chinese Association (Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan, THHK) in Java in 1900. Tjoe Bou San, a leading figure in this wave of Chinese nationalism in the Indies (and Suryadinata's first subject), argued that the Chinese in Indonesia were a weak minority, but could become strong as part of the hundreds of millions of Chinese who looked to China as their homeland. To do so, the *peranakan* had to be reformed on Confucian lines, and they had to learn Chinese. The THHK established new Chinese schools and mobilized the local population. Tjoe then played a leading role in the campaign to resist *onderschap*, Dutch nationality. The *peranakan* were *in* the Netherlands East Indies, he argued, but not *of* it. Their true homeland was China, and they should reject efforts to conjure a "Netherlands Indies nation" under Dutch leadership (p. 10). Chinese nationalism, by using modern organizational and mobilizing methods, even inspired early Indonesian nationalists.[4]

The same China-centered identity suggested standing aside Indonesian nationalism. Kwee Kek Beng and others like him insisted that *peranakan* nationalism should be centered on China. This vision transformed the *peranakan*, who lived in Indonesia and spoke only local languages, into "sojourners" little different from new waves of Chinese migrants filling specialized labor niches in Southeast Asia and North America in the same period. This mindset could cause problems, as the Chinese-nationalist *peranakan* Kwee Hing Tjiat discovered after refusing a Dutch passport and traveling on a Chinese document instead: he was refused re-entry into the Netherlands Indies as a foreigner and forced to settle in Shanghai. Living in exile in his supposed homeland, unable to speak Chinese languages, he soon declared China a "foreign land" (p. 27) and finally concluded that his homeland was, after all, Indonesia. The *peranakan*, he decided, "must take their place as sons

of Indonesia" (p. 28). In them, he now wrote, flowed the blood of both Genghis Khan and Dipenegoro, the Javanese fighter against Dutch rule.

This choice of an Indonesian homeland was made by other *peranakan* too. Kwee Tek Huay pressed for assimilation into Indonesian society coupled with rediscovery of Chinese traditions--a sort of multicultural approach that combined Indonesian national identity with Chinese cultural identity. Liem Koan Hian threw in his lot even more explicitly with Indonesian nationalism, shifting from a youthful insistence that "I am Chinese, I have a fatherland across the sea" (p. 68) to a concept of "Indies citizenship" in which the *peranakan* would have equal rights to other groups, and finally to a concept of *Indonesierschap*, Indonesian citizenship. This line of thinking led to the creation of the Indonesian Chinese Party, which threw in its lot with the Indonesian independence movement.

Just as *peranakan* nationalists fell into two streams, the Indonesian nationalist movement's response varied. Tjipto Mangunkusumo called Liem a good Indonesian and accepted that *peranakan* could embrace "mother Indonesia" fully without letting go of "father China" (p. 78). Other Indonesian nationalists were more hostile. With Dutch colonial law forbidding Chinese from owning land, there were some Indonesians who felt threatened: the Chinese who dominated trade as middlemen between big Dutch capital and local Indonesians could, they worried, buy up the land if allowed equal citizenship status. The Indonesian nationalist newspaper *Bahagia*, for instance, sympathized with China-centered *peranakan* nationalism, but said it was better to let the *peranakan* "remain sons of China," fellow Asians but foreigners nevertheless (p. 30). This echoed the *peranakan* Malay-language newspaper *Sin Po*, which drew on evolutionary theory to argue for a separate Chinese identity. "Chickens and ducks resemble each other in many respects," *Sin Po* edito-

rialized. Nevertheless, "to make chickens become ducks or the other way around is impossible" (p. 33).

Rejection by the majority Indonesian population drove some *peranakan* assimilationists back into identification with China. After helping Indonesia gain independence, Liem Koan Hian was arrested in 1951 as a suspected communist. On his release from prison, he opted to take up citizenship in the People's Republic of China, blaming anti-Chinese racism in Indonesia. Independent Indonesia under the presidency of Sukarno (1945-66) allowed for *peranakan* groups that preached "integration" of the Chinese as Indonesian citizens with their own culture, such as Yap Thiam Hien. Sukarno counted Chinese assimilationists like the Muslim convert and member of parliament Abdul Karim Oey among his inner circle of friends. Independent Indonesia eventually reached a citizenship agreement with China that seemed to settle the status of Chinese-Indonesians as citizens of Indonesia. The debate within the *peranakan* shifted from one over which nation they belonged to, to one between "integration" into a multicultural Indonesia with the *peranakan* Chinese accepted as one strand of the nation, and "assimilation" into an all-encompassing Indonesian identity.

This mirrored a debate within Indonesian nationalism that Suryadinata glosses as one of ethnic nationalism versus "social" (civic) nationalism (pp. 143-144). Under President Suharto's more dictatorial government (1966-98) the debate was settled in favor of ethnic nationalism. Chinese-Indonesians were to be assimilated, and even forced to "Indonesianize" their names. Abdul Karim Oey, whose work centered on efforts to convert the Chinese to Islam as part of a project of assimilation, was even refused permission to translate religious materials into Chinese. Yap Thiam Hien is one Chinese-Indonesian who refused to change his name. For him, minority rights became human rights. Suryadinata suggests that Yap, by ex-

tending this principle into his work as a human rights activist, became an *Indonesian* symbol of human rights, transcending his *peranakan*-rooted struggle for rights. In this sense, perhaps, the Indonesian-Chinese have served the Indonesian nation by holding on to their identity.

Since the fall of Suharto and Indonesian democratization, Chinese identity has experienced a resurgence in Indonesia. Suryadinata touches on this in his final chapter, one added to the second Indonesian-language edition of his book and included in this first English translation. Anti-Chinese riots in 1998 suggested that the Chinese were still defined as "other" by many Indonesians, still defined as "not indigenous." Assimilation is now seen as incompatible with Indonesian democracy. This resurgent identity has also been transnationalized, with China's increasing importance making it advantageous to learn Mandarin. Suryadinata nuances the case for a more transnational Chinese identity, pointing out that it is available only to the more affluent classes of Chinese-Indonesians (p. 154).

This discussion of contemporary developments in Chinese-Indonesian identity, which is once again spilling across borders, could be expanded. The final essay problematizes identity, but it does so in ways that highlight some of the weaknesses of this book. Suryadinata is a scholar of the Chinese in Southeast Asia and of Indonesia, but he makes few connections to wider developments in nationalism studies. Many developments among the *peranakan* will be familiar to scholars of nationalism. Can the *peranakan* be Chinese if they do not speak the language? Should they opt for their own schools to inculcate values defined as Confucian, or embrace "modern" education? Why were vernacular newspapers in the Malay language so important in *peranakan* identity formation? This point about vernacular newspapers, for instance, could be expanded. Three of Suryadinata's case studies are editors of the newspaper *Sin Po*. Thus, he describes the "*Sin Po* group" as a

carrier of China-centered nationalism. Given the importance of the newspaper in spreading Chinese identity, some consideration of Benedict Anderson's analysis of "print-capitalism" would seem obligatory, but there is none here.[5]

The reliance on these vernacular newspapers as sources, and a tight focus on the seven men analyzed, means that while contested *peranakan* identities are well analyzed, there is little discussion of the equally-contested identities "Indonesian" and "Chinese." The latter, especially, is taken to be monolithic and fixed, as it no doubt was by the colonial-period *peranakan* figures of the book. Yet even today, "Chinese" is hardly a uniform identity, or even a single language. Since language defines the boundaries of the *peranakan* community, some further consideration of the fact that the figures analyzed spoke Malay (now formalized as Indonesian) and even played a role in formalizing a language taking shape at the time would be useful. A useful edit of this book would have put part of the final chapter, with its historiographical overview, up front--as it stands, discussion over how to define the word *peranakan* does not begin until page 144, when the first definition of the word finally appears. The book is written for Indonesians and translated for Indonesianists--non-specialists may be left scratching their heads when informed that one Dutch figure is "a kind of Douwes Dekker for the Chinese" (p. 6).

If more context were provided, this book (and presumably others in the Ethnic Studies series) would receive a wider and much-deserved readership. The multiple identities of Southeast Asia, and the overseas Chinese, are fascinating cases that shed a good deal of light on national identity, and deserve far more attention from scholars of nationalism. The Chinese-Indonesian community and its multiple identities is receiving more study today.[6] As many have noted, nationalism studies can tend to be too centered on European and American cases.[7] Works like *Peranakan's Search for National Identity* are valuable and deserve to

be better-known among English-language readers, so the translation of this Indonesian-language study into English is certainly welcome. It would be even more valuable if directed at a wider readership.

Notes

[1]. Wang Gungwu, ed., *Only Connect! Sino-Malay Encounters* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003).

[2]. There is a rich literature on Indonesian identity formation and nationalism. Works on nationalism in Indonesia include George McT. Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952); Benedict Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); Takashi Shiraishi, *An Age in Motion: Popular Radicalism in Java 1912-1926* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); and Rudolph Mrazek, *Sjahrir: Politics and Exile in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Program, 1994). For a case outside Java, see Audrey R. Kahin, *Rebellion to Integration: West Sumatra and the Indonesian Polity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999).

[3]. Timothy J. Stanley argues that the first Chinese mass political party was Kang Youwei's "Save the Emperor Society" founded in Vancouver in 1898. "'Chinamen Wherever We Go': Chinese Nationalism and Guangdong Merchants in British Columbia, 1871-1911," *Canadian Historical Review* 77, no. 4 (December 1996): 475-503.

[4]. The best evocation of this phenomenon is probably Pramoedya Ananta Toer's Buru quartet of novels, especially *Child of all Nations*, translated by Max Lane (New York: Penguin, 1991).

[5]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

[6]. See for instance Pamela Allen and Sarah Turner, eds., Special Issue: "Speaking Out: Chinese Indonesians after Suharto," *Asian Ethnicity* 4, no. 3 (2003).

[7]. Anderson points this out in the revised edition of *Imagined Communities*. There are efforts to combat this, such as Stein Tonneson and Hans Antlov, eds., *Asian Forms of the Nation* (Surrey: Curzon, 1996). However, the complaint is still made, including in recent postings in H-Nationalism.

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