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Minority Stages: Sino-Indonesian Performance and Public Display.
By Josh Stenberg. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019.
xi+257 pp.

Josh Stenberg aims to rethink much of the received wisdom about Sino-Indonesian identity/ies in this wide-ranging, deeply researched and engagingly written study. He makes a compelling case that Indonesian Chinese performance is not simply a minority or fringe activity but an “integral contribution to Indonesia’s performing arts” (p. 169).

Each chapter adds complexity and nuance to the overarching theme of the book: Indonesians with Chinese heritage deploy many different strategies to negotiate and articulate their Sino-Indonesian identities in the contexts of particular places, times and situations. Although suppression, or at least suspicion, of Chinese language, Chinese culture and Chinese-ness in general has a long history throughout Southeast Asia, the especially heinous repression under President Soeharto’s New Order regime (1965–98) understandably is a recurring motif throughout the book. Stenberg points out the irony “that suppressions resulted in the deeper integration of Chinese arts and stories into Javanese society” (p. 167). The succinct history in the introduction of the long involvement of people of Chinese heritage in what is now Indonesia succeeds (as does the rest of the book) in showing “how unsound it is to conceive of Chinese as alien to the archipelago” (p. 8).

The first genre study (in chapter 1) focuses on four hundred years of various Indonesian approaches to *xiqu*, which many would generalize as ‘Chinese opera’ (although Stenberg mostly avoids that term). Although most of the detailed history of *xiqu* in Indonesia is “largely unrecoverable” (p. 36), the author nevertheless succeeds in painting a vivid picture, based on an impressive array of sources in a variety of languages, of the ups and downs of *xiqu* performances of various sorts throughout the archipelago. The author concludes that *xiqu* “was a major source of entertainment for both Chinese

and non-Chinese residents of the Indies” (p. 48) until its intrinsic Chinese-ness made it untenable to perform under New Order anti-Chinese policies. The chapter provides an encouraging conclusion in its accounts of recent revivals since the fall of Soeharto.

In chapter 2, Stenberg turns to the *sine qua non* of Indonesian theatre—*wayang*—in various Chinese-inflected forms, using Chinese stories, Chinese-style puppets and (at least in the past) Chinese languages. He uncovers a history for *wayang potehi* (based on southern Chinese glove puppet theatre), again by mobilizing an impressive array of sources into a coherent, but never overinterpreted, narrative, that accounts for the hybridity of the form. In current expressions, *wayang potehi* is generally performed in the Indonesian language. The chapter also covers other hybrid Sino-Indonesian *wayang* performances. The author concludes that such hybrid performances are affected by “the vocabulary and cultural policy of a given political regime”, but ably contribute to making the case for “the Chinese minority as an integral element of an Indonesian whole” (p. 75).

In contrast to the arguably assimilative project of Chinese *wayang*, the Chinese-language spoken theatre that arose towards the end of the colonial period (chapter 3) did so in the spirit of increased interest in identification with China and was “associated with a strident and self-conscious aspiration to modernity” (p. 76). The bulk of the chapter is an account of one play, *Temple of the Five Ancestors*. The author contrasts the different political angles of its two versions: one version was meant “to unite Chinese and Indonesians as fellow victims” (p. 95), and the other to “foster a sense of patriotic Chineseness” (p. 95). Chinese-language spoken theatre disappeared during the New Order and has not experienced a revival. Back in a more assimilative mode, chapter 4 focuses on different incarnations of a single Chinese story, *Sampek Engtay*, as an exemplar of Chinese influence on more mainstream Indonesian-language spoken theatre.

The final two chapters (5 and 6) expand the discussion to less formalized Sino-Indonesian performances, and the strategies adopted

by Chinese social and religious organizations to the strictures on expressions of Chinese culture imposed by the New Order. This umbrella provides an opportunity for discussions of Chinese patronage of Sundanese traditional performing arts in Bandung, of temple-centred festivals in Bandung, Jakarta and West Kalimantan, and an informative description of how Chinese religious practices have been adapted to conform (at least to the letter of the law) to Indonesia's constitutionally mandated monotheism.

Minority Stages, for me at least, is a revelatory book. Although I regard myself as reasonably well-informed about Javanese and Sundanese traditional arts, I came away from the book amazed at how little exposure I have had, during extended stays in Indonesia, to the panoply of Chinese-derived performing activities apparently going on all around me. Revelatory or not, I imagine other readers will be as impressed as I am by the author's array of literary, archival and ethnographic sources, his apparent mastery of Indonesian, Chinese and European languages, and the ease with which he ties all of these disparate sources together into compelling narratives and arguments.

The book's conclusion is an open-ended exposition with a disorienting (pardon the pun) and unexpected turn to self-reflexivity. Josh Stenberg uses himself as a final case study of the performativity of minority identities, leaving us simultaneously with a notion of his pedigree and some ideas about where his scholarly skills come from, but still no concrete verdict about his 'identity'. His point—that understanding the "gaze of the majority" (p. 165) is a crucial component of identity formation—is an important insight and one that argues for why attention to Indonesia's 'minority stages' leads to a more sophisticated understanding of Indonesia, China and indeed the world.

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