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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Peranakan Chinese Identities in the Globalizing Malay Archipelago by Leo Suryadinata

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Leo Suryadinata, *Peranakan Chinese Identities in the Globalizing Malay Archipelago*.

Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2022, xi + 289 pp., ISBN: 9789814951678, price: SGD 42.70 (paperback); 9789814951708, price: SGD 34.25 (ebook).

This book is a collection of diverse studies on the Peranakan Chinese in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore written by Leo Suryadinata, a prolific expert in this field, between 2007 and 2021. It consists of fourteen papers, the themes of which range from Peranakan identities, culture, and society, to politics, language, and literature. Suryadinata organizes his papers into two parts. The first deals with the regional dimensions of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore (nine chapters), while the second focuses on Indonesia (five chapters).

In the first out of four chapters in part 1, Leo Suryadinata deals with the evolving concept of Peranakan Chinese in the Malay Archipelago. He briefly introduces the term Peranakan in chapter 1. This is followed by tracing the Peranakan Chinese identities in Indonesia in chapter 2, and in Malaysia and Singapore in chapter 3. Chapter 4 analyses the resurgence of Peranakan associations and identities. Here, Suryadinata discusses recent research from the Genome Institute of Singapore (GIS) published in 2021 that confirms the localized origins of the Peranakan Chinese in Singapore. This scientific research shows that their DNA has 5.62 percent of Malay ancestry (p. 47).

Chapter 5 analyses the social and political aspects of Peranakan Chinese in the Malay Archipelago. Although they had a similar experience during the Dutch and British colonial eras, the Peranakan Chinese exhibit different degrees of integration during the independence era. Comparing the diversity and size of Peranakan populations, Suryadinata concludes that "... [T]he smaller the Chinese community, the more likely the government adopts an assimilation policy" (p. 64).

Chapters 6 and 7 compare the translation practices and literature of Peranakan Chinese. Here, Suryadinata suggests that the form and content of Peranakan Chinese literature are determined or influenced by the size of their population vis-à-vis the non-Peranakan Chinese community (*totok*) or the Chinese community vis-à-vis indigenous people. In addition, state policies toward the presence of Chinese and Western language education are important in shaping Peranakan literature (pp. 96–98).

The book returns to the theme of politics in chapter 8 by featuring ten prominent figures, all men, from the colonial and independence era. From Indonesia, Suryadinata provides us with brief biographies of Tjou Bou San, Kan Hok Hoei, and Liem Koen Hian from the colonial period and Siauw Giok Tjhan, Yap Thiam Hien, and Abdul Karim Oei Tjeng Hien for the Independence era. From Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore, Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang are fea-

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tured for the colonial era. During the independence era, the chapter features Tan Cheng Lock from Malaysia and Lee Kuan Yew from Singapore. Reading the biography of these figures, we learn that having a Western educational background has been crucial for these activists to play their role in social politics.

Suryadinata closes part 1 with a comment on a speech by Tan Ta Sen (found in the book's appendix, pp. 245–254). Addressing a Peranakan audience in Malacca in 2013, Tan Ta Sen argued that the Peranakan Chinese continue to re-Sinicize rather than localize (p. 138). Suryadinata puts forward a different opinion. Analyzing the historical background of the Peranakan Chinese, he emphasizes differences in nation-building processes; Indonesia's policy was based on indigenization, while Malaya (Malaysia and Singapore) adopted a pluralistic approach (p. 142). Later, Malaysia adopted a more Malay-centric vision of nationhood. Suryadinata concludes that the recent configurations of Chinese Peranakan identities are more globalized—or, citing Thung Ju Lan's term (2005), “glocalized” (Chinese culture with global and local elements combined into a new modern urban form)—rather than re-Sinicized.

Part 2 focuses on Indonesia and consists of five chapters. The cultural theme predominates in this part. Chapter 10 starts with Peranakan Chinese in relation to the Indonesian press, language, and literature. Unlike the earlier focus on politics, this chapter features Peranakan Chinese women writers contributing to Indonesian literature to the present day. Chapters 11 and 12 deal with the religious landscape of Chinese Indonesia, including Islam and “Chinese religions” (Confucianism, Tridharma, and Buddhism). Suryadinata describes the restoration of “Chinese religions” during the post-Soeharto era and their impact on Chinese identity.

Chapter 13 focuses on Peranakan Chinese politics and decolonization in Indonesia. This chapter portrays the shifting government policies toward the Chinese from Sukarno to Soeharto. This discussion is also taken up in chapter 14, which reflects on the integration of Indonesian Chinese into mainstream society in the post-Soeharto era. Soeharto's assimilationist policy had left a profound impact on the “Indonesianization” of the Chinese but, Suryadinata argues, the pre-existing division between *Peranakan* and *Totok* still exists. Despite the decreasing number of *Totok* groups and the adoption of Indonesian citizenship, the presence of *Totok* is strong in cultural and economic fields (pp. 236, 241). Starting from that point, this chapter discusses the heterogeneity of Peranakan Chinese, their political participation, their changing identities, and the rise of China. The book ends with two appendixes, the aforementioned speech of Tan Ta Sen and a selected bibliography of books on the Peranakan Chinese published between 2007 and 2021.

At the onset of this book, Suryadinata stated his aim to “... encourage people to look at the Peranakan Chinese phenomena from a regional and even global perspective” (p. ix). In my case, this aim has been successful. This book helps social scientists to understand recent developments of Peranakan Chinese by tracing their historical background and placing them in a regional context, rather than approaching this minority group as an isolated community. However, Suryadinata has himself noted the shortcoming of his book: it does not discuss the economic aspect of Peranakan Chinese. The size of the population is important, but, as mentioned in chapter 14, their economic role and the rise of China’s economy are particularly indispensable to understanding their place in contemporary Southeast Asia and beyond. Hopefully, this implies that we may expect a sequel to this book in the future.

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Reference

Thung Ju Lan, “Peranakan Chinese Community in Indonesia and Globalization” in Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Peranakan Communities in the Era of Decolonization and Globalization*. Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre and NUS Baba House, 2015, pp. 135–136.