



VISUAL CULTURES OF THE ETHNIC CHINESE IN INDONESIA

ABIDIN KUSNO

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ROWMAN &
LITTLEFIELD
INTERNATIONAL

London • New York

Published by Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd.
Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB
www.rowmaninternational.com

Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd. is an affiliate of Rowman & Littlefield
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706, USA
With additional offices in Boulder, New York, Toronto (Canada), and Plymouth (UK)
www.rowman.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB 978-1-7834-8756-1
PB 978-1-7834-8757-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is Available

ISBN 978-1-78348-756-1 (cloth: alk. paper)
ISBN 978-1-78348-757-8 (pbk: alk. paper)
ISBN 978-1-78348-758-5 (electronic)

∞™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

**Visual Cultures
of the Ethnic Chinese
in Indonesia**

*For my peranakan family in Jakarta, Medan and
Surabaya, who live like urban majority*

In memory of Pak Ben and Pak Tjong

Contents

List of Figures	ix
Introduction	1
PART I: VISUAL ENVIRONMENT	15
1 The Riots	17
2 The Shophouse	45
PART II: PUBLIC EYES/PRIVATE LENSES	69
3 Cartoons and <i>Cersil</i> (Martial Art Stories)	71
4 The Film <i>Gie</i>	91
5 Family Photo Album	109
PART III: VISIONARY/(IN)VISIBILITY	135
6 Developers	137
7 Architects	159
EPILOGUE	181
8 The Lost Home	183
Bibliography	189
Index	201
About the Author	207

List of Figures

Figure 1.1	The new Glodok Plaza, 2000.	22
Figure 1.2	The new Pasar Glodok, built in the architectural style of (post)colonial Indonesia, 2002.	24
Figure 1.3	Commemorators carried photos of the May riots in front of the new Pasar Glodok, 2001.	26
Figure 1.4	Candra Naya, a nineteenth-century house built in a Chinese architectural style, surrounded by modern skyscrapers, 2001.	27
Figure 1.5	The three sections of the story: "I turned out to be a child of rape"; "Where are you my child?"; "My child. Your father is a rapist."	31
Figure 1.6	"Keep running. The two criminals try to escape from the police helicopter. People on the street pay no attention to what is going on."	32
Figure 1.7	Ruins between new construction in Northwest Jakarta.	37
Figure 2.1	The old <i>ruko</i> in the Glodok area of contemporary Jakarta.	46
Figure 2.2	Elevated <i>ruko</i> in Jakarta, 2010.	50
Figure 2.3	An example of contemporary billboarded <i>ruko</i> .	54
Figure 2.4	<i>Ruko</i> of the 1970s with frames for billboards in ruins, Gajah Mada Street, Jakarta.	55
Figure 2.5	Newly built neoclassical style <i>ruko</i> with car parking at the front, 2010.	57
Figure 2.6	A minimalist style <i>ruko</i> .	58
Figure 2.7	The <i>ruko</i> Saladin Square in Depok.	62
Figure 3.1	The comic strip of Ko Put On from Sin Po, circa 1935.	77
Figure 3.2	Pak Tuntung from <i>Analisa</i> newspaper, 2007.	80

Figure 3.3	Pak Tuntung, <i>Analisa</i> , circa 2007 (?).	81
Figure 3.4	<i>Bangau Merah</i> (The Red Crane) by Asmaraman S. Kho Ping Hoo, 1980s. Top: The famous Hong Kong <i>Old Master Q</i> (<i>Lau Fu Tze</i>).	85
Figure 5.1	Kwee Zwan Liang, the photographer and his young son, Kwee Kiem Han.	113
Figure 5.2	Zwan Liang, the photographer and members of his household.	115
Figure 5.3	Pedagogy West and East: Kwee Kiem King (Eugene) graduating from a Dutch school in 1939 (top); Family trip to Borobudur (bottom).	117
Figure 5.4	Indonesian landscape, family excursion and construction of self.	118
Figure 5.5	Birth and Death: Kwee Lee Nio's baby and the grave of Kwee Zwan Lwan.	119
Figure 5.6	Property, family and inheritance.	123
Figure 5.7	The House and the interior.	125
Figure 5.8	Mother and child.	127
Figure 5.9	<i>Baboe</i> and child.	127
Figure 6.1	Central Park, a superblock developed by Agung Podomoro Group.	151
Figure 7.1	Han Awal (right) and Soewondo Sutedjo in Delft in the 1950s.	166
Figure 7.2	Wastu Pragantha Tjong in front of Gedung G of Jakarta's Municipal Office.	168

Introduction

During some pleasant Dutch Summer days in 2005, I had a series of discussion with some friends in Amsterdam on issues around elite Chinese *peranakan* families in the 1930s Java and their self-representations through home videos and family photo albums.¹ The context for the discussion was the availability of some of these materials at the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) where some of these friends worked. What interested me at the beginning were the visual mediums and the question of writing histories. I was also intrigued by the social and political effects of technology as the Indies (colonial Indonesia) entered the maturing age of mechanical reproduction. Only then, did I realize that I was in fact also concerned about questions around identities of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia as these were constructed domestically via the technology of imagery. I have been interested in issues around ethnic Chinese less as an expert on the subject, but more as a person of whom journalists today would call, unambiguously, “ethnic Chinese.” Friends in Indonesia, however, are less certain about the term. We have been poking fun at each other that we are not only “ethnic Chinese” but also “confused (not Confucian) ethnic Chinese” – perhaps one that is regarded in Javanese slang as “*Cino wurung, Jowo tanggung, Londo pun durung*”² (no-longer Chinese, not-quite Javanese and not-yet Dutch). Some scholars would probably conceptualized us as *peranakan*, or better, “confused *peranakan*” – those who were born locally but not sure if his or her first language is Indonesian or a Chinese dialect, as they are often spoken at the same time. It seems thus more relieving to try to leave behind “Chinese heritage” and assume an “Indonesian” position – whatever this might mean. On the other hand, this aspiration for a “nationalist” position (-thanks to Suharto’s New Order in which I grew up) in fact reflects even more my connection to “Chinese heritage.”

When I looked cursorily at the visual materials my friends have obtained from NIOD (see chapter 6), I was, rather spontaneously, wondering how the home videos and photo albums might help illuminate historically the ambiguities of “ethnic Chinese” in Indonesia today (- even as the concerned elite families occupied a world that is radically different from our own). It would certainly be interesting to see analyses of the visual cultures of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and consider how their private imaging shaped the ways in which they represented themselves in the public. What can the family photos, popular cartoons, houses and even the city they built tell us about the ethnic Chinese conception of themselves? What is it that they want to see of themselves and what is it that they want “us” to see? How did their ways of seeing themselves and the world, intertwine with those of other social groups and the state apparatus? How different were their techniques (or cultures) of seeing compared to those of the Eurasian or Arab elite *peranakan* families and members of the *kraton* (of Javanese rulers) as well as the commoners?

We know that back then camera and photograph were one of the key instruments for the colonial state to police and classify people in the Indies. They came together with police and prisons. Yet, what happened to these “same” technologies when they were used by private persons at different places? What were the social and political implications when the technologies of the state were popularized and domesticated, especially in the hands of the *peranakan* Chinese families? There are many more questions to come, but what I am suggesting is that the self-representations of the family life, indoor and outdoor (as these were depicted in photo albums, home videos and houses), could be fruitfully understood as part of the gradual self-formation of a class, a nation and identity, which is crossed in innumerable ways by shifting power relations under colonial and postcolonial conditions. The questions would thus not only be about the content or what is shown in the image as a simple expression of “truth” (as in the writing of social history), but also the social and political assumptions behind the framing and the staging of the image. It would also include historicization of vision as what Karen Strassler did in her *Refracted Vision*. Very few attempts in fact have been made at such analysis of the visual cultures of the ethnic Chinese ethnic. This deficiency can in part be attributed to the textual and verbal focus in most of the study on ethnic Chinese – where images, if utilized, are used merely as supporting materials rather than the subject of inquiries.

THE CHINESE AND THE VISUAL REGIME

Major research has been done on the social, political and cultural histories of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. There are many books out today on ethnic

Chinese (especially from Indonesia). They have been devoted to thoughtful analyses of important elements of Chinese societies, their political thoughts and relations to the state and other groups in Indonesian society.³ These existing studies show how rich and complicated this field of inquiry is. At the same time it is useful to recognize that (with a few exceptions) the materials used in most of the research are textual and oral. Very little research, however, has been done on visual representations and their roles in shaping identities and politics of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. If we regard the treatment of the visual and material cultures of the *peranakan* Chinese, it is strangely apparent that the treatment (of say, architecture, food and clothing) is almost in terms of their exotic uniqueness, that is, as essentially an aesthetic issue (see chapter 8). Without denying the importance of this genre of research, we should open up a more fertile and equally complex ground, which would enable us to take more into account the disciplinary components in, say, the new type of house as a symbolization of wealth and (declining) power, to understand them not as merely elements of “cultural expression” but as themselves part of dynamic responses to the dilemmas and contradictions of the changing social formations within which they are embedded. In these visual representations we perhaps can see the piecemeal, often imperceptible, self-formation of a class undergoing a situation which remains to be analysed.

The interest on the visual however is more than an attempt to incorporate a “forgotten” analytical category. Rather, the visual could be seen as a political site for the rethinking of identity and cultures. Instead of seeing the social life of the ethnic Chinese as guaranteed by some shared visual cultures, this book explores the ways in which their different modes of visual representation help to produce, and are in turn produced by social conflict.

This book examines not only how the visual modes of representations expressed as well as shaped the experiences of the ethnic Chinese under the changing landscapes of power, but also explore complex and often contradictory issues and connections between visual representation, everyday life, political intentions and the urban contexts. It complements Rudolf Mrazek’s *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (2002) and Karen Strassler’s *The Refracted Vision: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (2010). These books explored the experiences of people under colonial and postcolonial conditions as they encountered technologies and urbanization that had increasingly become part of their daily life. The responses were varied, but the conceptions of who they were and what they had become were profoundly shaped by the ways in which they experienced technology. Mrazek’s work is centred on the historical experiences of Dutch and Javanese communities in the colonial time, and therefore very little discussion is devoted to the role and the experiences of ethnic Chinese communities. Yet, as Strassler points out, by the eve of World War II,

we could say that Chinese Indonesians had already become a loyal consumer of technology. But they were not only regular consumers. Instead they were involved in investing meanings into technologies by promoting and supplying them to the public (- this includes the dealership of building construction materials since colonial time). What is important about technology then is not only how it works functionally, but also how it changes the ways in which one think about his or her social and political identities.

This book is historically framed by the long twentieth century in which the rapid speed and scale of urbanization has been marked by the intermingling of various and often radically different regimes of power. The long century represents the passages of modernity in the interstices of colonialism and postcolonial condition. This era of “intertwined histories and overlapping territories” has made the twentieth century an age in temporal comparison.⁴ In other words, it is difficult to understand a fragment of Indonesian history without encountering at the same time the spectre of what came before (and after). The ethnic Chinese (and other population groups of various ethnicities) for instance were forced to make a living under three profoundly different types of visual regimes (-the Dutch colonial rule, the Japanese military administration, and the decolonized Indonesian sociopolitical orders). Other examples include the postcolonial era, which contained its own contradictory and often irreconcilable though comparable scopic regimes (of Sukarno, Suharto and Post 1998-Indonesia). The changes and continuities of the postcolonial eras have left many ethnic Chinese with fragmentary understanding of who they are and what they have done to themselves and to other population groups. Framed within the dilemma, the questions and contradictions of the long twentieth century, this book thus aim at understanding some of the visual cultures of the ethnic Chinese as an enterprise for coming to terms with socio-economic and politico-cultural crisis under the changing regimes of representations.

This book analyses family photographs, a film, and a range of built “architectural” environment. The essays look at the ways in which these various modes of visual representations shaped and were shaped by how the ethnic Chinese confronted the period of economic dislocation and radical social change during Dutch colonialism and the nationalist struggles in the decolonized Indonesia (including the post-1965 and 1998 social environments). How did the ethnic Chinese communities (re)present themselves to both their domestic and outside world under the changing regimes of representation? How did they visualize, symbolically, their place in Indonesian society? How did the visual shape the “ambiguities” of the Chinese, the perception of the “economic” identity, and the forgetting of their involvement in politics, cultures and histories of the nation? More broadly, how did the visual address the interconnectedness of domestic life, the urban cultural milieu and ideologies of the state and the ruling class?

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRESENT

With the political opening in Indonesia today, works on ethnic Chinese has been proliferating, but the issues remain complex and has become even more under the current waves of globalization. Many Chinese Indonesians recognize that they have freed themselves (or have been liberated) on one level but remain victims of their past on another. An illustration of this can be found in one of the recent studies on Chinese Indonesians concerning the practices and effects of assimilation policy imposed during the New Order era: *Chinese Indonesians: State Policy, Monoculture and Multiculture* (Suryadinata, 2004). The authors in this volume are all aware that several discriminatory regulations of the previous era remain active today raising the question of whether Suharto's legacy is over – including the canonical image that Chinese Indonesians are in one way or another always connected to the world of the (super) rich. While recognizing themselves as “minority,” ethnic Chinese also realized that they have been seen as “capitalist.” This seems to resonate with the view of Benedict Anderson who once indicated two paradoxical sociopolitical phenomena whose convergence is shaping the experience and conceptualization of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.⁵ On the one hand, the economic, technological and cultural forces of colonialism and globalization pushed conditions for the formation of “capitalistic” ethnic Chinese, while on the other hand, the state has generated identity and identification that constituted the discourses of othering the ethnic Chinese (whose long history of migration and integration went back to pre-colonial era) as “foreign” minority. Instead of using a particular label, such as “minority,” or “capitalists” to illustrate, for instance, the visual cultures of ethnic Chinese – this book seeks to show how ethnic Chinese construct themselves in and through mechanical reproduction even as their own self-conceptions were subjected to hegemonic ideas, public images and the politics of the state at the time.

In our liberal-left academic world, we stigmatize those who are affiliated with the power elites in order to become rich conglomerates. We sympathize with those who are powerless as they are subjected to widespread public resentment and hatred. We also feel ambiguous towards works that focus on tracing “Chinese-ness” through various icons from the temples to deities as if they will soon be wiped out altogether less by politics than by Chinese own forces of economy. When looking at *Barongsai* (Chinese dragon dance) and reading the *cersil* martial art novels of Kho Ping Hoo we often forget that ethnic Chinese in Indonesia are also modernizers and they love technologies, art deco and Euro-American style houses. They have also been actively engaged in modernity like their Dutch and Indonesian counterparts. Some of them were courageous “dandies,” not unlike the pre-war time Sukarno and Mas Marco Kartodikromo, who couldn't stand injustices. And they

relentlessly fashioned themselves (often unconsciously) beyond the norms and forms of a “colonial” society. But quite a few of them, like other Indonesians and “Dutch” masters, also look down on their poorer counterparts and despise their own housemaids even as their life are depended on the latter’s servitude. The question is then in what ways could a historical work on the visual cultures of ethnic Chinese remain sensitive and critical to the present political dilemmas and social practices. Could the analyses of visual cultures of the Chinese ethnic group address the conditions of both the 1930s and, say, the 1990s?

WHO ARE THE ETHNIC CHINESE? WHOSE CHINESE?

The numbers of Indonesian of ethnic Chinese is never clear to me. According to the 2010 census, Indonesian of ethnic Chinese is estimated to be almost 3 million or 1.2 percent of the total population of Indonesia. Yet some people believe that it is 3–4 percent, which means 7–10 million.⁶ What is even more interesting, and perhaps is the reason of why it is difficult to quantify “ethnic Chinese,” is that some (again, how many?) ethnic Chinese don’t feel the need to represent themselves as ethnic Chinese, for various reasons that are hard to explain. One of the main reasons is that they see themselves as “Indonesians” and anything else is less important. This consideration nevertheless points to a situation where to “become Indonesian” is not a process that is automatic, as for the ethnic Chinese the term is reachable only after certain acceptance by the state and the Indonesian public. The state (since colonial time) has made it a business to connect and disconnect “Chinese” and “Indonesia.” This game (partly inherited from politics of *divide et impera*) of constructing self and other as well as those in between within the nation has a profound impact on not only who are the Chinese, but also whose Chinese?

The Dutch colonial state had little ambiguity over the category for what it wished (for all socio-economic reasons) was to create a “middle group” to politically avoid direct confrontation with the population it administrated. The “foreign orientals” served the purpose of “stabilizing” the relations between the “Europeans” and the “natives.” The category “foreign oriental” could be used and blamed (often as scapegoat) to solve issues confronting the stability of the colony. Decolonization provided an opportunity to start anew. In 1963, Sukarno proposed the concept of *suku peranakan Tionghoa* (peranakan Chinese ethnic group) to position this ethnic group locally alongside other ethnic groups in Indonesia, for he believes that ethnic Chinese, like many ethnic groups in Indonesia, such as “suku Jawa, suku Sunda, suku Batak, suku Minang . . . and suku peranakan Tionghoa” are all Indonesians.⁷

This concept to eliminate the othering or middle-ing” of ethnic Chinese however was abandoned in President Suharto’s Indonesia. Instead Suharto regime replayed the colonial “divide and conquer” strategy by installing the term “Cina” to othering ethnic Chinese. In 1967, a military officer formulated a rationale: “The term *Cina* refers not to an ethnic group but to a dynasty where Chinese race (*ras Cina*) came from” and “unlike *Tionghoa/Tionggok* which carries negative psycho-political association for Indonesian people, *Cina* has been used in the past.”⁸ It is not clear how *Tionghoa* would carry “negative psycho-political association,” but the construction of a name such as *Cina* with a focus on the “place of origin” serves to consolidate “Indonesia” as belonging to “non-Chinese” indigenous groups. And the reference to ahistorical dynastic past served to make *Cina* timeless. This proclamation (sanctioned by the military state in the name of “rakyat Indonesia”) of portraying ethnic Chinese as perpetually foreign to local societies if not potentially royal to China has served to essentialize and externalize ethnic Chinese. It has also made it difficult to use concepts such as “migration,” “transnationalism,” and “diaspora” without the risk of replaying the connotations intended by the military.

I remember a conversation with an ethnic Chinese architect (see chapter 8) who started his work in Sukarno era and were fully committed to Sukarno’s nation-building. When I mentioned to him that I was wondering how relevant ethnicity is to the identity of an architect. He was able to make clear that he would prefer to be referred as “ethnic Chinese Indonesian.” The notion of “Chinese,” when stand alone, is problematic. And, he added, “Please, . . . no diaspora.” The “nationalistic” framework assumed by this architect and also Chinese Indonesian intellectuals is thus an attempt to dislodge the essentializing and diasporic discourse of the state in differentiating ethnic Chinese from other ethnic groups. The national framework that ethnic Chinese are striving for has also allowed them to locate themselves within the specificity of their local struggles without being too easily absorbed into the revival of Pan-ethnic Chinese identity worldwide following the rise of China. The nation-building discourse thus is a struggle for tolerance, inclusiveness and embrace of diversity with a strong sense of the challenge posed by class conflict that is stemming from economic disparity between ethnic groups but often framed under an opposition between the indigenous and ethnic Chinese population.

It is in this context that in the post-Suharto era, ethnic Chinese are dropping *Cina* to adopt “*Tionghoa*” a term associated with a new identity partly to counter the New Order’s violence of category, partly to pay tribute to the earlier identity formation of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. Unlike *Cina*, which was associated with the feudalistic age of dynasty in China, “*Tionghoa*,” as this term was first used in the early twentieth century Indonesia, carries with it the meaning of revolution, youth and newness against the old. The term is

also associated with Tiong Hoa Hui Kuan, the first modern social and educational movement in colonial Indonesia formed by ethnic Chinese, an association that subsequently inspired modern movements of other ethnic groups (including Javanese's Taman Siswa and Serikat Islam). In this sense, while Tionghoa could be seen as making a reference to China, its meaning is both "modern" and profoundly "local" if not synonym with emancipation, (transnational) national liberation movement and modern consciousness associated with the idea of Indonesia and nation-building.

When Suharto's Indonesia used *Cina* to refer to ethnic Chinese, the term is not only derogatory as it implies, as according to Suryadinata, "greedy, unclean and immoral (and) it was used only when indigenous Indonesians wanted to belittle or humiliate their Chinese counterparts,"⁹ but it is also to take ethnic Chinese out of the history of Indonesia and nation-building. It is in this context that this book is taking part in the attempt to relocate ethnic Chinese in Indonesian history even as this is done discursively and incompletely through subjective interpretation of non-textual materials associated with popular cultures. I use the term visual not only to refer to the visual materials explored in the book, but also to the general challenge of visualizing the ethnic Chinese in their struggles over their identities, including moving from *Cina* to *Tionghoa*.

The post-Suharto era thus witnesses the increasing usage of "Tionghoa" or "peranakan Tionghoa" to refer to ethnic Chinese even though the term *Cina* now officially dropped by a presidential decree is still being used by the people (including younger ethnic Chinese). While mindful of the different terms and different associations in which ethnic Chinese are visualized, this book uses "ethnic Chinese," "Chinese Indonesian," "Tionghoa" or "peranakan Tionghoa" interchangeably. These terms connote some forms of locality associated with Indonesia where most of the lives of ethnic Chinese are shaped, not only by politics, but, as far as this book is concerned, by different forms of material and visual cultures, such as the built environment, photographs, cartoons and film.

STRUGGLE OVER REPRESENTATION

In 2013, I was contacted by Leo Suryadinata, the most dedicated historian and commentator of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, to write about the "role of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesian architects." My entry on "architecture" along with over 70 contributions would cover a broad range of professions, forming 3 volumes of book entitled (tentatively) *Peran etnik Tionghoa di Indonesia: dulu dan kini* (The roles of ethnic Tionghoa in Indonesia: Past and Present). Suryadinata has long been documenting the contributions of ethnic Chinese

in the nation-building of countries in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia. His works have gained new urgency as ethnic Chinese have begun to assert their identities in the climate of post-Suharto era. For this particular project on professions, Suryadinata followed the mission of Eddie Lembong, a pharmaceutical businessman and founder of Yayasan Nation-Building (Nabil) Foundation, an association formed in 2006, as represented by its name, to acknowledge and nurture the cross-cultural foundation of Indonesian nation (with particular focus on the roles of Tionghoa).

Mr. Lembong conceived this documentary project as a nation-building mission “to allow Tionghoa to recognize themselves and be recognized as contributors to Indonesian nation-building . . . and it is expected that materials from the books would serve as a source for a rewriting of Indonesian national history text book.” This project stemmed from Mr. Lembong’s feeling (especially after the 1998 May riots) that (even in the era of tolerance and embrace of diversity) Tionghoa have often (still) been considered by fellow Indonesians as “foreigners” and this according to Lembong, is due in large measure by the fact that Indonesian people know very little about the professional world of ethnic Chinese. Thus, Mr. Lembong declared, “Let’s compile, document, and write the contributions of Tionghoa in Indonesia in all fields.”

I accepted this invitation in the context of understanding Mr. Lembong’s sentiment about the sense of self-denial and alienation as well as discrimination that Tionghoa has experienced especially since the time of Suharto, and thus the importance of representing the contributions of Tionghoa within the context of nation-building. As I was writing in a style of “who-is-who” in the making of Indonesian architectural world, I got interested to write about “real estate” as well, partly because this is a field that is widely known for its capitalist venture. I thought it would be important to show the diversity of Tionghoa by juxtaposing two professions. Back to back then chapters 6 and 7 belong to a single project, but they are distinguished by the manner in which they are presented. Chapter 7 (on architects) offers a list of “architects” presented (albeit inadequately) in a manner of who-is-who, whereas chapter 6 (on developers) moves a little beyond listing by offering an argument (thus an opinion) critical of what the developers have done to the city and urban life, especially to the poor people who were most affected by the real estate development. My first draft received a comment agreeing that “real estate companies by nature are to make money and obtain great profit, but one wonders if anything more can be said about this industry, which is rather positive as we are looking for some positive aspects.” This comment is profoundly interesting as it seeks to move beyond seeing ethnic Chinese as only interested in business – a stereotype that the writing project ultimately seeks to overcome. What I have learned from being part of the project is that any representation