

BREAKING THE STEREOTYPE

Chinese Indonesian
women tell
their stories



EWI ANGGRAENI

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Dewi Anggraeni



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Foreword

Dewi Anggraeni is a well-known and accomplished storyteller. Since the appearance of her first novel *The Root of All Evil* (1987) her Australian readers have known her as a writer of fiction. Her earlier novels display a sensitive cross-cultural awareness of the experience of people (especially women like herself) who have lived in both Australia and Indonesia. Less well known to many Australians is her journalistic writing, for Dewi has been Australian correspondent for the major news and current affairs weekly *Tempo* and the leading English language daily *The Jakarta Post*. In her fiction and non-fiction work, Dewi has acted as a cultural broker between Australians and Indonesians, explaining each to the other. This role is exemplified in her book, *Who Did This To Our Bali?* (2003). At the same time Dewi has been discovering and realising herself. As she herself has written:

While I continuously seek my own place in Indonesian and Australian cultures, working as a journalist for *Tempo* has helped me fine-tune this search.¹

Women are central to much of her published work. Alison Broinowski has described the character Komala (an

1 Dewi Anggraeni Fraser, 'Literature and the Press', in H. Da Costa et al. (ed.), *Indonesians in Victoria from the 1950s*, Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 1995, p. 40.

Indonesian-born woman married to an Australian) in *The Root Of All Evil* as 'semi-autobiographical'.² Like other novelists, Dewi has clearly drawn inspiration from her own experience as an Indonesian woman married to an Australian to create her fictional stories. Women also feature prominently in her non-fiction writings. The most recent example of this is her book *Dreamseekers* (2006) which tells the stories of Indonesian women as domestic workers in Asia. She is also co-editor and author of the book (in Indonesian) *Menjurus Arus* (1997) which marks 25 years of publication of the Indonesian women's magazine *Femina*.

The present volume *Breaking the Stereotype* is Dewi's latest non-fiction book. It marks her first venture into biography, but we already know from its sub-title ('Chinese Indonesian Women Tell Their Stories') that this is another form of storytelling. Chinese Indonesian women tell their stories to her and, through her, to us. Indonesian women are again at the centre of her work, but this time it is *Chinese* Indonesian women. It is pertinent to note at this point that Dewi Anggraeni is not her original name. She is herself a Chinese Indonesian woman. Born in Jakarta in April 1945, she was given the name Tan Soen May, but voluntarily adopted her Indonesian name when she confirmed her Indonesian citizenship in 1963. This occurred several years before Suharto's New Order regime put pressure on Chinese Indonesians to change their names to Indonesian-sounding ones.

If in her earlier work Dewi continuously sought her 'own place in Indonesian and Australian cultures', perhaps in this volume and in her most recent novel *Snake* (2002), which is set among the ethnic Chinese communities of Southeast

2 Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996 (2nd edition), p. 212.

Asia, she is delving more deeply into the Chinese Indonesian side of her identity. If this is the case, she is doing it indirectly or even subconsciously. These are the stories of other Chinese Indonesian women, not hers. Unlike Dewi herself, who left Indonesia for Australia forty years ago, they remained in Indonesia through the *longue durée* of the Suharto New Order with its discrimination against ethnic Chinese, suppression of public expression of Chineseness, and outbreaks of anti-Chinese violence.

Underlying and feeding into these phenomena were negative stereotypes of the ethnic Chinese. Neither Dewi nor we can say with any certainty what her life would have been like had she stayed in Indonesia rather than emigrating to Australia. In telling the stories of these Chinese Indonesian women, Dewi shows us something of the variety of their experience. In so doing, she is deliberately seeking to break the negative stereotype of the ethnic Chinese and to allow us to see these individuals in the context of their Chinese ethnicity and in their full humanity. Hence the book's title *Breaking the Stereotype*.

Her focus on individual life stories can both illuminate and surprise. Take, for example, the case of Sias Mawarni Saputra (Lie Pit Yin). She was born into a Muslim family and has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, but she owns and manages a Chinese restaurant with an Italian name. Part of her education was at a Chinese language school but she moved to the Indonesian national curriculum when her father opted for Indonesian citizenship. She later returned to Chinese studies and became a teacher of Mandarin, but this took place before the fall of Suharto. Her university (Universitas Dharma Persada), founded in 1986, was the first private university in Indonesia to set up a Sinology program. This was only possible because the university rector (W.D. Sukisman) was a

senior Javanese general in BAKIN (the state intelligence agency) who himself had trained in Sinology at the University of Indonesia and had played a prominent part in the New Order policymaking and administration with regard to what it called 'the Chinese problem'. He personally encouraged Sias to study the history of the famous Muslim Chinese admiral Cheng Ho. Notwithstanding these connections and her Muslim background, she was not immune to the anti-Chinese violence in May 1998 in which her business was damaged and she suffered financial loss.

It is not my place to summarise the life stories that Dewi has related for us in this volume. They should not, of course, be regarded as representative of the experience of all Chinese Indonesians. They are simply the stories of the individuals she has selected for us. I hope this book will encourage many others to tell their own stories as well. We should all be thankful for her initiative.

Charles A. Coppel
Melbourne, June 2010

Acknowledgements

A book does not materialise out of the writer's imagination, though imagination is certainly a necessary element. Not only is a book populated by characters, in the case of this book, real-life characters, but also by those who do not appear *in persona*, yet without whom the book would remain only an idea.

I wish therefore to sincerely thank all the people who have helped me make this book.

Let me begin with those I call the protagonists, the persons who have figuratively guided my hand writing their stories, in the order of the chapters of the book: Ester Indahyani Jusuf, Linda Christanty, Susi Susanty, Maria Sundah, Sias Mawarni Saputra, Jane Luyke Oey, Milana Yo, and Meylani Yo. Related to these extraordinary main characters are also their respective relatives who have generously and actively taken part in helping me form the pictures: Ester's husband Suryo, Maria's daughter Lucy, Sias's daughter Jenny, Jane's daughter Mado, her sister-in-law Leonie, and her grandson Vidorrekto, and Milana and Meylani's brother Robert.

The person who was present from the moment I articulated the idea till the typing of the last word in the book, is my long-suffering friend Widarti Gunawan, who often had to cajole me to continue whenever I felt deflated for various reasons, and who herself never gave up. I owe her a deep moral debt.

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Many, many more friends have helped me along the way. I feel privileged to have enjoyed their friendships and been the recipient of their generosity of spirit.

*Dewi Anggraeni
Melbourne 2010*

Introduction

I had often thought that I had a fair understanding of the situation of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, because having Chinese ancestry myself I had an inside perspective. And in my work as a journalist I automatically placed the ethnic Chinese situation in the national and regional contexts. As things unravelled however, I felt less and less sure. Though the issues did not occupy my mind at all times, each time they became topical I felt alerted and would promptly monitor the development. This had the effect of forcing me to keep learning and increasing my grasp and consequently, my understanding of the situation continued to evolve.

When reading essays, journalistic articles, and scholarly papers about the ethnic Chinese I very often felt that they missed a lot of things, that they each only captured one particular corner of the whole picture. This is mostly so because they did not fully correspond with my own experience and the experiences of other people I knew, about being in an ethnic Chinese ambience.

Pasting this realisation against the regime of editing, collating and presentation involved before each piece of writing seeing the light of day, I knew that many things, even important issues, disappeared in the course of making the writing presentable.

I wanted to prise some of the issues I deemed important, out of the editing 'black hole' and present them as the core

contents of a book, because they were very significant not only for others to understand, but for the ethnic Chinese to understand themselves. I came to this realisation because as I continued my observation it became increasingly clear that I was looking at a very large and complex picture. And in reality I was only familiar with several patches of it. So I began to plan a book which would magnify parts which only came across as little nooks and crannies in the big picture as revealed to the public. When I eventually started researching in earnest I found that these pieces had common threads between them. When canvassed together, they formed another, albeit smaller picture.

I began with addressing a widespread stereotype. Then, as I explored further, I was enthralled by the large number of aspects which fell outside the popular stereotype.

Despite what has already been published, public perceptions about the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia have hardly progressed from the painfully stereotypical images and pictures, which are little more than sketches. One of the most persistent and widespread stories I have heard, is that the ethnic Chinese are terminally addicted to making money, at the expense of everything else. Even the less damning images are not exactly very flattering. It is disturbing that, though there have been many ethnic Chinese who do not in any stretch of imagination fit the stereotype, these individuals have somehow been hidden or at least remained invisible from the view of the mainstream public.

This book focuses on a selected number of individuals, who will be revealed as full-body personalities still in the context of their Chinese ethnicity, and allowed to be seen in their full humanity. They may not always shine and glow throughout their respective stories, but they tell a great deal not only about themselves, but also of the societies in which

they live. I shall call these individuals 'protagonists' instead of 'respondents', though 'protagonist' is usually used in fiction, because I feel 'respondent' conveys a meaning which did not fully cover their roles. While they are all real-life stories, the individuals are the protagonists of their stories.

During the period covering the lives of the eight protagonists, there were a number of incidents of anti-Chinese violence of varying degrees of severity and scope, two of these receiving widespread media coverage. One is the post-30 September 1965 violence, and the other is the 11-14 May 1998 riots. The post-30 September 1965 violence, however, is not specifically anti-Chinese; it is mainly anti-communist. These two tragedies feature in three of the eight protagonists' stories; the May 1998 tragedy features in two protagonists' stories, and yet another protagonist experienced it indirectly.

Ethnic Chinese are also believed to be largely the same, wherever they are living – whichever country they call home – and to whatever social class they belong. This book will reveal whether or not that perception is based on fact.

Right from Chapter I, Ester Indahyani Jusuf's life takes the reader to scenes which transcend ethnic boundaries. It tells of situations outside of what are usually regarded as ethnic Chinese issues, yet where she is unquestionably involved. Ester's trauma related to the post-30 September 1965 violence, for instance, stretches beyond ethnic Chinese issues.

In Chapter II, Linda Christanty reveals a different perspective from that of Ester Indahyani Jusuf. She was brought up by her Bangka-Malay family, in Bangka-Malay culture and ambience, yet as the daughter of a mother adopted from an ethnic Chinese family, who incidentally fully denies her Chinese ethnicity, she has had a subliminal consciousness

that being ethnic Chinese is problematic. Later this consciousness was reinforced. Because of her Chinese appearance, when she left her hometown, a community where she was known, she found herself singled out from time to time.

And her experiences also show that, while anti-Chinese sentiments subsided after the May 1998 riots, when the majority of Indonesians were shocked to the core, there are still pockets where these sentiments are still strong and freely expressed.

In Chapter III, Susi Susanti displays an intuitive nationalism. She feels well-grounded in Indonesia. She was at the height of her badminton championship when the May 1998 riots broke out. It would not be difficult for her to seek another country's citizenship then, yet she had no desire to do so. However she makes sure that her children will have a greater ease of movement by providing them with international education. Intuitively maybe, she is guarding against further ethnicity-driven hostility.

Chapter IV paints Maria Sundah's life where, to all intents and purposes, the merging of ethnicities in her extended family could not be more natural. However the political ambience generated a degree of discomfort in her being explicitly identified as ethnic Chinese. Maria's story also allows us to glimpse the segment of the mid-20th century middle class populated by ethnic Chinese, Eurasian and indigenous people among whom the common thread was Dutch education. It also alludes to the ways different sub-groups of Indonesian ethnic Chinese view one another.

In Chapter V, Sias Mawarni Saputra's experiences in life reflect those of many ethnic Chinese in small and medium size businesses. Many simply internalise the unpleasantness and risks as part of life. However, while many turn inwards, a number have been known to embrace the local culture and

try to merge into the local community, with varying degrees of success. In such cases, one of the stumbling blocks, it appears, has been religion. Anecdotally, it appears that acceptance is more readily given when the ethnic Chinese are or become, Muslims. At the personal level, this is not easy, especially during the New Order time, when the ethnic Chinese were deliberately set aside, figuratively speaking, as the 'other', by the wielders of power. In the meantime the population, the majority of whom are Muslims, were cajoled and encouraged to be suspicious of them*.

In Chapter VI, the story necessarily begins with Jane Luyke's husband, the late Oey Hay Djoen, a nationalist activist contemporary of Pramoedya Ananta Toer. When Hay Djoen was imprisoned for his political convictions during the New Order rule, he left his wife Jane and daughter Mado to fend for themselves. Their story is a testament of courage, steadfastness and friendships which transcend ideological differences, notably from their priests and *haj* friends; two classes of people known for their anti-communist stance.

In Chapter VII, both Meylani and Milana, though telling separate, individual stories, reveal that their Chinese ethnicity has not been an issue, let alone an embarrassment. This may have a great deal to do with them being visibly mixed-race, or it is also possible that, far from the seat of power where political power-play occurs, the various communities in Papua interact in a more natural way. And even more interesting is the fact that while they mix easily with other communities, they have been happy to be identified as ethnic Chinese. Meylani for instance, perceives the difference in terms of attitude to life, between the ethnic Chinese and the local Papuans, without attributing positive or negative points to either party.

This book allows the reader to enter the protagonists' lives and learn of their intimate thoughts to varying degrees – each to the extent she let the exploration reach. And each has been very generous with her cooperation. This offers different experiences to different readers; those interested in the protagonist being ethnic Chinese can place themselves inside looking out, while those who are interested in the kind of life the protagonist has regardless of her ethnicity, may have views in all directions.

The stories also reveal that, in terms of social acceptance in general, appearance definitely counts.

Once singled out as ethnic Chinese, the protagonists have to contend with the attitude resulting from the popular stereotypical image: rich, preoccupied with money, exclusive, unscrupulous, hard slave-driver, selfish and possessing of no loyalty to the country where they live outside China. This unfortunate image, according to Jemma Purdey, was intentionally maintained by the political elite of the New Order government.¹

A very important point needs to be stressed, however. Despite the negative image propagated left, right, and centre, not all indigenous and other non-Chinese people have been motivated or driven to victimise the ethnic Chinese. On the impersonal level, since May 1998 numerous non-governmental organisations, large and small, were founded by concerned individuals, with the aim of helping victims of the May riots, as well as generally working toward addressing and rectifying the tainted image of the ethnic Chinese lodged in the minds of the community. Many of the activists are not ethnic Chinese. On the personal level, this sentiment of solidarity in human decency is shown again and again in different ways, in the accounts given by Linda Christanty, Jane Luyke Oey, Sias Mawarni Saputra and Susi Susanti.

As an Adjunct Research Associate at the School of Political and Social Inquiry, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, I have been in the comfortable position of being morally and logistically supported by the University, for which I am very grateful. Nonetheless this is not a book version of a doctoral thesis. It is meant to be a small contribution to the pool of writing in an endeavour to shed new light on a section of Indonesian history which has affected the lives of millions of people. I did not offer any written contract for my respondents/protagonists to sign. When I began contact with those who feature in this work, I had not met them before, though in the cases of Ester Indahyani Jusuf, Susi Susanti, and Linda Christanty, I had heard and/or read about them, or seen them on television. However in each case the first contact established a fair degree of mutual trust. At least in one case, when that trust did not develop we agreed to discontinue the contact and that the candidate would not be part of the book.

Barring those of Milana Yo and Meylani Yo, each story fills one chapter. And I have divided the seven chapters into four parts, the first three according to the historical times covered by each story. Ester Indahyani Jusuf, Linda Christanty and Susi Susanti grew up during the New Order era and have been significantly but differently affected by the May 1998 riots. Maria Sundah delves into her family background, shares her recollections of the times of her childhood in the 1950s, adolescence in the 1960s, followed by her adulthood until today. The lives of Jane Luyke Oey and *Haji* Sias Mawarni Saputra have been bruised as they went through 30 September 1965 and May 1998 tragedies. The chapter on Milana Yo and Meylani Yo occupies one part, because despite the existence of a common thread with Ester and Linda, it has its own feel, colour and ambience.