



THE CHINESE *of* INDONESIA

AND THEIR SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The Relationship Between
Collective Memory and the Media

AIMEE DAWIS



D634.334.2
G 20104

182

华人中心

THE CHINESE *of* INDONESIA

AND THEIR SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The Relationship Between
Collective Memory and the Media

Aimee Dawis



CAMBRIA
PRESS

AMHERST, NEW YORK

Copyright 2009 Aimee Dawis

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior permission of the publisher.

Requests for permission should be directed to:
permissions@cambriapress.com, or mailed to:
Cambria Press

20 Northpointe Parkway, Suite 188
Amherst, NY 14228

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dawis, Aimee.

The Chinese of Indonesia and their search for identity : the relationship between collective memory and the media / by Aimee Dawis ; with a foreword by Melani Budianta.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60497-606-9 (alk. paper)

1. Chinese—Indonesia—Ethnic identity. 2. Chinese—Cultural assimilation—Indonesia. 3. Chinese—Indonesia—Social conditions—20th century. 4. Mass media—Social aspects—Indonesia. 5. Mass media and culture—Indonesia. 6. Indonesia—Ethnic relations—20th century. I. Title.

DS632.C5D39 2009

305.895'10598—dc22

2009005982

FOREWORD

Aimee Dawis' *The Chinese of Indonesia and Their Search for Identity: The Relationship Between Collective Memory and the Media* captures a precarious moment in Indonesia's history—when Suharto's New Order enforced its assimilationist policy on Chinese Indonesians. Emerging out of the 1965–1966 Communist cleansing bloodbath, the New Order government issued a ban on the use of Chinese languages, traditions, and arts in public in its effort to cut any links with Communist China. Chinese schools were closed, and Chinese Indonesians were urged to change their Chinese names. The book brings into the spotlight a generation who was born, raised, and came to age within this climate of repression.

The climate of repression gave way when the “*Reformasi*” movement against authoritarianism forced President Suharto to step down from power on May 21, 1998. This transition to openness was sadly marked by a dark moment: One week before

Suharto fell, in 2 hellish days, Chinese shops were set on fire and looted. More than 150 women of Chinese descent were mass raped. However, these women later disappeared, leaving no traces or evidence of the atrocity.

When Aimee started her research in 2002, the country had a different atmosphere. In 2000 President Abdurachman Wahid annulled legal discrimination against Chinese Indonesians, and the following year President Megawati issued a decree to make Chinese New Year one of Indonesia's national holidays. Chinese dragon dances were performed in public places and Mandarin language courses mushroomed. This also happened to be the dawn of China as a rising global economic player.

In this climate of openness, Aimee gathered 25 Chinese Indonesians born after 1966, who had watched videotapes of Chinese *kung fu* (martial arts) films and series from Hong Kong, Mainland China, and Taiwan during the time when anything Chinese was restricted. She, herself, was part of this generation. It has to be noted, however, that Chinese Indonesians were not the only *kung fu* film consumers. The fact that the videotapes were popular at that time, and were available all over Indonesia, indicates that the consumers were not bound by race or ethnicity. Up to the mid-1980s, the 200 million population was entertained with the sole television channel allowed, the state-owned *Televisi Republik Indonesia* (TVRI), which was filled with official rituals and ideological indoctrination. In this context, it is not surprising that people consumed the *kung fu* films and series during their pastime.

However, Aimee assumed that the Chinese Indonesian consumers had other motives, consciously or unconsciously, for watching the *kung fu* films in a forbidden time. She employed focus group discussions as a means to find out the context, the reasons, and the ways each of her respondents consumed

the films in the past. She unearthed the anxiety, dreams, and unresolved problems related to the issue of "Chineseness" as a problematic identity, one which was always marked and negated at the same time. Using Appadurai's concept of imagined nostalgia, she found interesting and moving patterns by which her respondents constructed a mythic China out of films, coming from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, from which they measured, mirrored, and modeled their racial, gender, and diasporic identities.

This study is significant in many ways. It throws light, in the line of research done by Janice Radway, on the ways consumers actively use the transnational media to construct meaning to settle their own battle of subjectivities within the local contexts. What is most interesting in this study, however, is not the cultural politics of the New Order, that is, between the 1970s and 1990s when the respondents were actually watching the *kung fu* films, but the very project initiated by Aimee: the act of remembering, reconstructing, and making meaning out of their past in post-*Reformasi* Indonesia.

The very project illustrates the turning point in the consciousness of many Chinese Indonesians. It attests to the need of Chinese Indonesians as a heterogeneous population to reevaluate the past and reposition themselves culturally. The timing of the research is significant. For many Chinese Indonesians who had to negate their Chinese cultural identity and tradition for decades, it was a moment of return. For the majority of Chinese Indonesians who have been culturally assimilated for many generations and missed nothing, the shock of 1998 had forced them to reevaluate their positions.

As Aimee wrote candidly in her preface, she came to Jakarta after residing out of the country for a long time with a lot of questions about her own identity as an Indonesian with a Chinese background. She also had to deal with her position as a Chinese

Indonesian with historical baggage in the new cultural politics of the post-*Reformasi* Indonesia. As her research was done in a constructivist paradigm, Aimee did provide a framework for the meaning-making processes to occur. This is not to say that her project was biased but to note it had an important “side product”: What occurred in the focus group discussions was the process in which the members of the groups, with Aimee included, helped one another in understanding themselves and their histories as Chinese Indonesians.

The 2000s also saw the rise of political consciousness of many Chinese Indonesians. Organizations bearing Chinese identity, such as *Perhimpunan Indonesia Tionghoa* (*Perhimpunan INTI*), or The Chinese-Indonesian Association, and *Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia* (PSMTI), or the Social Organization of Chinese-Indonesians, which counted their members by the thousands in 2008, sprung up. In short, Aimee’s study is a part of this new awakening, a cultural process of identity in flux, a phase that will keep on shifting as Indonesia redefines itself in the future.

Aimee’s study points to the failure of the New Order assimilationist policy. However, one thing to remember is that, while forced assimilation by the state betrayed underlying racist motives, it should not be equated with cultural assimilation, which occurred more “naturally” with different dynamics in diverse localities throughout the Indonesian islands for hundreds of years. The process has resulted in the hybrid *peranakan* cultures and has enriched local cultures. To assume that some of the respondents who were not interested in learning Mandarin or who did not consider themselves Chinese were victims of the New Order policy is not only guilty of essentializing the content of Chineseness but also is forgetting the fact that even without the forced assimilation, the processes of cultural assimilation had been there all along. There is a caveat that in this era of new

Chinese consciousness, the culturally assimilated Chinese were often looked upon as being politically incorrect, as internalizing the New Order ideology, and thus, as having “false consciousness.” Aimee’s study has rightly shown the plurality of Chinese Indonesians, and this study offers valuable insights into these complicated dynamics, in which Indonesians of diverse and often hybrid backgrounds continue to redefine themselves and their place in nation building.

Professor Melani Budianta
The University of Indonesia, Jakarta

PREFACE

While I was completing my tertiary education in the United States, I decided to devote myself to researching the Chinese in Indonesia and the media. The decision was a life-defining moment that has shaped my academic career and research interests, not to mention my own identity as a Chinese Indonesian.¹

Looking back on my undergraduate years, I realized that I had always been interested in the Chinese of Indonesia. My senior theses at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, as a communications major and an Asian-Pacific studies scholar were on the organizational culture of the Indonesian club at the university and the historical and economic significance of the Chinese in Indonesia, respectively.

As an undergraduate, I practiced the first lessons I learned on ethnographic research and ethnographic interviewing by delving into the roles and expectations of the Indonesian club's members. Being thousands of miles away from home, the organization

proved to be a place of solace and activities for homesick new students and a place where ethnicity and prejudice no longer mattered. The Indonesian club at Loyola Marymount University (also called Indonesians at Loyola Marymount University [ILMU]) was and still is not exclusively Chinese in membership. Yet, the club represents a place where the tensions the Chinese encountered in the centuries of Indonesia's history no longer matter. I learned more about the history of the Chinese in Indonesia, their migration patterns, and how they lived in the country while I was writing my senior thesis for the Asian-Pacific studies program.

My curiosity with the Chinese in Indonesia and the communications systems of the country was further stimulated by the time I spent at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, as a graduate student. I was already acquainted with the scholarly contributions of Cornell researchers such as George Kahin and Benedict Anderson while looking up materials on the Chinese in Indonesia for my Asian Pacific studies thesis. I was, thus, enthralled with the Kroch Library Asia at Cornell, which has every imaginable periodical on Indonesia and an astounding collection of rare manuscripts and books in *Bahasa Indonesia*, the Indonesian language. The Kroch library and 17 other libraries at Cornell, along with an intellectual community that conducted the latest research on Indonesia, supported my archival research on the television industry as a social system in Indonesia. The results of the archival research became my master's thesis at the Department of Communication.

My experiences at Cornell solidified my conviction of pursuing my doctoral degree in communications, with an emphasis on ethnic studies and identity. The rigorous doctoral curriculum at the Culture and Communication Department at New York University provided me with advanced research tools and the

theoretical grounding in cultural studies, media ecology, collective memory, and identity. It was during this time that I decided to fuse my interests in communications and the Chinese in Indonesia for my doctoral research.

Throughout my doctoral research and beyond, I have often asked myself and have been asked by others why, exactly, did I choose to devote myself to the study of the Chinese in Indonesia and the media. Perhaps it is because, ever since I was a 10-year-old, I have spent so much of my life in foreign countries (Singapore and the United States). Perhaps it is because I never learned to read and write in Chinese due to assimilationist policies put in place by the Suharto government between 1965 and 1998 that forbade the use of Chinese characters and the celebration of all Chinese cultural festivals such as Chinese New Year. Perhaps it is because I was searching for my own understanding of what it means to be a Chinese individual in Indonesia and my own search for answers when the ethnic Chinese became the targets of angry mobs recurrently throughout Indonesia's history. Whatever the reason, these questions have fueled my own quest to comprehend how the people in my generation grapple with their sense of identity while growing up in the repressive media and cultural environments that were created during the Suharto era. This book, based on my doctoral research, explores the collective memory of members of this generation while they were growing up in the Suharto era. More specifically, the book emphasizes how they used imported media from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, which were dubbed in English and subtitled in *Bahasa Indonesia*, to learn about Chinese culture and to articulate, manage, and negotiate their identity as Chinese individuals in Indonesia.)

ENDNOTE

1. The current media and sociocultural environments in Indonesia and Asia have stopped referring to the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia as *Indonesian Chinese* but have started using *Chinese Indonesians* instead. According to Leo Suryadinata, in his book, *Chinese-Indonesians: State Policy, Monoculture and Multiculture*, the term *Indonesian Chinese* tends to emphasize their Chineseness while *Chinese Indonesians* tends to emphasize their "Indonesianness." Thus, the shift from *Indonesian Chinese* to *Chinese Indonesians* is necessary to debunk the stereotype that they are an exclusive group. *Chinese Indonesians* also promotes a sense of nationalism among the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not be possible without the help of Professor Melani Budianta, who has helped me formulate my ideas, has guided me throughout my research process, and has given me insightful editorial comments and suggestions on previous drafts of the book.

I have benefited tremendously from the advice of Dr. Ishadi, SK; Professors Siva Vaidhyanathan and Radha Hedge; Professors Leo Suryadinata and Charles Coppel; Dr. Mely G. Tan; Myra Sidharta; Eddie Lembong; Ignatius Wibowo; Natalia Subagjo; Hartono; Iwan Ong; Dr. Thung Ju Lan; and all those who assisted with collecting data and manuscript revisions, especially Yuni Alfiah, as well as everyone at Cambria Press, particularly Toni Tan.

I am grateful for the intellectual and moral support of my friends, colleagues, and professors throughout my tertiary education and academic career at Loyola Marymount University at

Los Angeles; Cornell University in Ithaca, New York; New York University in New York City; and the University of Indonesia at Jakarta in Indonesia.

I also thank my parents; my sister, Lily; and my brothers Iyen, Ikwang, and Iming for their unfailing support and faith in me.

I would also like to thank my husband, Kinggo, for always believing in me and pushing me to do my very best.

Last, but not least, I thank God for making everything possible in my life, especially the gift of our beautiful daughter, Putri Aimee Srijaya.

THE CHINESE
of INDONESIA
AND THEIR SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	xi
Foreword	xiii
Preface	xix
Acknowledgments	xxiii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Mapping the Terrain of Identity, Memory, and the Media	17
The Overseas Chinese and Their Place in the World	18
The Context of Chinese Indonesians	22
Identity, Memory, and the Media: The Case of Chinese Indonesians	37
Chapter 2: "Going Home": The Dilemmas of Native Ethnography	45
Qualitative Framework of Inquiry and Native Ethnography	47
The Constructivist Paradigm	53
The Constructivist Research Design	55
Chapter 3: The Chinese Indonesians in Suharto's New Order: Heterogeneity, Assimilation, and Culture	73
Chinese Indonesians: A Heterogeneous Community	75

The <i>Totok</i> and the <i>Peranakan</i>	76
Beyond Categories: The Slippery Task of Identifying Chinese Indonesians	80
Regional Origins	82
Family and Religion	91
Assimilationist Policies, Culture, and the Media	96
 Chapter 4: The Chinese Indonesians and the Media: Identity Construction and Rearticulation of “Chineseness” in Diaspora	 133
From Golden Spoons to <i>Mah Jong</i> :	
A Diversity of Experiences	135
Family and Religion	140
Regional Differences	148
Flying Tiger and Little Dragon Lady:	
Boys’ and Girls’ Culture	151
Boys’ Culture	152
Girls’ Culture	159
<i>Kalah dan Salah</i> : Fear, “Imagined Security,” and the Politics of Identity	163
 Conclusion	 175
Summary	176
The Present Situation	183
Implications and Suggestions for Future Research	186
Concluding Words	191
 Epilogue: The Future of Chinese Indonesians	 197