

**Marleen Dieleman, Juliette Koning, and Peter Post, eds. *Chinese Indonesians and Regime Change*. Leiden: Brill, 2011. 236 pp.**

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The editors of this volume are experts in their fields and readers' expectations regarding the book's content may be high. Peter Post has written much on Japanese relations with the Netherlands Indies and with Indonesia. Marleen Dieleman has shown how the Salim Group—the conglomerate owned by Chinese Indonesian magnate Liem Sioe Liong—reorganized to survive the Asian economic crisis.<sup>1</sup> Juliette Koning's expertise ranges from Chinese business practices to survival strategies used by the poor to Christianity in Indonesia.

In examining institutional changes and the active responses of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia to the upheavals resulting from such changes, the eight chapters (and the Introduction) attempt to shift the focus of previous studies of Indonesia's Chinese minority away from state-centered approaches that center on such topics as citizenship, discrimination, and migration and away from explanations for business success that emphasize networks, "Chinese values," and cronyism. These essays detail active responses to changes in the political and economic environment, and to some of the changes that affected daily life.

Indonesia underwent at least four regime changes in the past century: The Japanese Occupation in 1942–45 that replaced Dutch colonial rule, the Indonesian Revolution, the fall of Sukarno after 1965, and the end of the Suharto era in 1998. Individual chapters reach further back than those upheavals, to 1909. Instead of grouping the eight chapters under their three headings (Dignity, Justice, Survival), this review will approach them in roughly chronological order.

Loa Joe Djinn is a little-known hero of Chinese (and Indonesian) nationalism in the Indies. A Dutch housewife accused this shop owner of having phonograph records that were missing from her house among his secondhand goods. Loa, brought before a police court (*politierol*) for receiving stolen goods, was sentenced to three months' hard labor. (Europeans had their own courts; lesser criminal cases involving Asian defendants went to this court.) Loa petitioned the Governor-General, asserting his innocence, but his petition was denied, and he served his sentence in 1909. Upon his release, Loa did not let the matter rest. Given the well-known deficiencies of the *politierol*—the magistrate was also a colonial administrator, few rules of procedure applied to admission of evidence, and no appeal was possible—Loa complained in the press and in telegrams to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and to its ambassador in The Hague. This appeal to a foreign power was the last straw needed to break the existing court system and advance criminal justice reform for non-Europeans in the Indies. Although it took until January 1914, author Patricia Tjiook-Liem believes this affair decisively influenced the colonial power's change-of-heart. No longer would Chinese—or natives—be tried for lesser criminal cases in courts lacking basic legal safeguards.

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<sup>1</sup> Marleen Dieleman, *The Rhythm of Strategy: A Corporate Geography of the Salim Group of Indonesia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

Nobuto Yamamoto challenges the conventional view of the early Indonesian press that the first newspapers and other publications were an affair of the indigenous, separate from the Malay-Chinese press of its time. He emphasizes the many links that united Chinese and indigenous journalists in the early twentieth century and asserts that the “class issues and cultural affiliation” of the *peranakan* (locally oriented Chinese) made for complex responses to, for example, early Indonesian nationalism. Unfortunately, Yamamoto does not refer to Charles Coppel’s writings on “Mestizo society” that similarly pointed to interethnic ties and solidarity in this period.<sup>2</sup>

Not regime change but the Great Depression is the focus of Alexander Claver’s chapter, in which he describes the challenges and successes of the coffee firm Margo-Redjo. Despite its Javanese name (“prosperous road”), the firm was owned by a Semarang Chinese, Tan Tiong Ie. Using the Margo-Redjo archives, Claver details the company’s innovative marketing strategy, giving it credit for the firm’s success in the difficult years of economic distress. Although Margo-Redjo lost most of its production facilities as a result of the Dutch “scorched earth” defense against the Japanese in February 1942, a descendant of the founder still sells coffee in Indonesia today.

This brings us to Oei Tjong Ham’s business, Kian Gwan. Kunio Yoshihara called Kian Gwan the “First Business Empire of Southeast Asia.”<sup>3</sup> It was an ethnic Chinese firm, and has attracted scholarly interest for some time. Peter Post’s special contribution is to look closely at owner Oei Tjong Hauw’s behavior during the Japanese period. His attitude of “business is business” and an unwillingness to distinguish between trading on the black market and legal operations helped the firm survive the war, despite the limitations it faced and subsequent accusations of “collaboration.” Less successful in meeting the challenges of independent Indonesia, and shaken by the sudden death of Oei Tjong Hauw in 1950, the firm ran afoul of *Indonesianisasi* policies and the economic break with the Netherlands. The government nationalized Kian Gwan’s Indonesian assets in the 1960s; the global firm’s less important, foreign branches were all that survived. Post has capably utilized a great variety of sources, among them interviews, company records, and Dutch archives, to tell a convincing story.

Marlene Dieleman’s contribution looks at a firm that planted its roots before the Japanese period. The Salim Group grew under Suharto to become the largest privately owned enterprise in Indonesia. She used access to company records, interviews, and other sources to trace how founder Liem Sioe Liong built his businesses and to describe how the core activities of the group survived after 1998. In her opinion, the firm successfully outgrew “traditional” Chinese business strategies that depended on ethnic networks and the crony culture of the New Order. Beginning with the entry of the founder’s son, Western-educated Anthony Salim, into management, the company gradually reduced its dependence on the Suharto clique. Despite losing control of entire branches (including its house bank, Bank Central Asia, in the 1997–98 economic crisis), the core of its business survived. Dieleman, who shows these changing links

<sup>2</sup> Charles A. Coppel, *Studying the Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia* (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 2002), in particular, chapter 8, “Mestizo Society as an Imagined Community,” pp. 124–35, and chapter 9, “Revisiting Furnivall’s ‘Plural Society’: Colonial Java as a Mestizo Society?,” pp. 136–56.

<sup>3</sup> Kunio Yoshihara, ed., *Oei Tjong Ham Concern: The First Business Empire of Southeast Asia* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1989).

quantitatively for the period 1984–2003, suggests that other large, ethnic Chinese enterprises may display similar transitions as they expand, choosing “bridging” to international partners over “bonding” to other Chinese firms.

The volume’s other contributions deal with cultural issues. Juliette Koning seeks explanations for the recent conversions of many ethnic Chinese to Pentecostal Christianity. The Pentecostal emphasis on emotional experience, signs, and being moved “by the Spirit” seems out of character for the supposedly materialistic and businesslike Chinese. The businessmen in Yogyakarta that Koning interviewed (who own or operate small and medium-size businesses) instead emphasized the feeling of community the churches provided. These movements offer an ethnic niche, having only Chinese Indonesian preachers. Not least, born-again Christians assert an expectation of salvation and a “right to prosperity.” Koning concludes that these conversions represent an active response to the insecurity brought on by economic upheaval and political change.

Nobuhiro Aizawa describes how “assimilation”—the idea that the ethnic Chinese would, voluntarily, abandon their supposed exclusivity and displays of Chinese culture, thereby putting an end to the oft-cited “Chinese problem” (*masalah Cina*)—looked in reality in the Suharto period. The Department of the Interior and other bureaucratic offices that dealt with the issue wanted most of all to “open up” Chinese society (conceived of as secretive, even devious) and to ensure public security and generous election majorities for the regime. As a result, ethnic labeling on identity cards and the insistence on maintaining the odious SBKRI (Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Indonesia, Proof of Indonesian Citizenship), both of which tended to single out the minority, took precedence over assimilationist policy. Understandably, this left the original “assimilationists” of the 1960s and most Chinese Indonesians highly disillusioned. Aizawa does not deal with other impediments to assimilation that I can think of: scapegoating and the tradition of collecting “non-official” bureaucratic fees.

Finally, Andreas Susanto turns the tables and looks at how Chinese Indonesians complied with those official policies that were designed to remove “all forms of cultural affinity based on the country of origin.” In interviews with a variety of persons in Yogyakarta, mostly male and mostly between the ages of thirty and sixty, Susanto collected diverse responses. He defines four types of assimilationists to reflect his findings: “natural” assimilationists are pragmatic, including, for example, those in an interethnic marriage (mostly middle-class, especially journalists and artists); “opportunistic” assimilationists choose assimilation for mostly economic reasons (middle-class businessmen might exemplify this group); and “symbolic” assimilationists are those who comply with official regulations but oppose the force behind them, and continue to express pride at being Chinese (for example, upper-class business people). The final group, “cosmopolitan” assimilationists, are mostly young people who describe themselves as Indonesian and are Chinese only in appearance, if at all. The first and last groups comprise, for the most part, people who are younger than those in the other two groups, and thus age and profession make a difference in attitudes toward assimilation.

That the responses to assimilation policies vary greatly is hardly surprising, given the large differences among the Chinese in Yogyakarta and in Indonesia. At the same

time, Susanto shows that attitudes toward being “Indonesian” can be fluid, and even persons closest to being fully “Indonesian” may, when confronted with prejudice, rediscover their Chineseness.

These essays resulted from a series of seminars at the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, Amsterdam, in 2006 and 2007, and a workshop organized by that institute with participants from the Netherlands and Japan. Occasionally, an essay does not quite meet the high standard of English-language proficiency usually found in publications from the Netherlands. All are, however, well worth attention. The diverse contributions covering a century of change and challenge for Indonesia’s largest minority offer many new insights, even if they are only partially integrated into the theme of “regime change.”