

Hui Yew-Foong. *Strangers at Home: History and Subjectivity among the Chinese Communities of West Kalimantan, Indonesia*. Leiden: Brill, 2011. 344 pp.

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Studies of Indonesia are chock-full of superbly detailed local histories and insightful narratives on minorities. Those familiar with these works need not strain to match the names of scholars with the places or ethnic groups about which they have written. Often the two—regional history and minority studies—go hand-in-hand, as evidenced by the many works written about local Chinese communities. With *Strangers at Home*, a powerful account of the trials and tribulations of the Chinese communities of West Kalimantan, Hui Yew-Foong continues this rich tradition, melding regional history and an ethnic minority study in a way that recalls the best that Indonesian studies has to offer. At the same time, Hui breaks with a different tradition by contributing to a new and long overdue trend—the extensive use of Chinese-language materials in the study of Chinese communities, either at the national or local level. Beyond the violent and tragic history these communities have endured, *Strangers at Home* demonstrates with precision and alarming awareness the struggles these Chinese community members have experienced regarding their place in the making of their own history, and raises searing questions about ethnic identity, nationality, and nationalism that these communities have debated and deliberated, and which have torn them apart. This includes the Chinese community members' confusion and instability of attachment to place as strangers from a distant homeland, China, while situated in the only home many have ever known, West Kalimantan, Indonesia.

In a work of this ilk, it is easy at the outset to lay claim to recognition of a community's internal diversity, and the constructed awkwardness that the use of a single ethnic appellation brings with it, only thereafter, as the narrative progresses, to sloppily regress into some measure of primordialism by referring to the group in question as a monolithic or organic whole—in this case, simply “the Chinese.” Hui is at pains to avoid this all-too-common pitfall. At every turn he is agonizingly cognizant of ethnography's limitations and the violence that writing can impart to the dizzying and messy array of experience and identity. Hui owns up to the cruel choices he was forced to make in the conduct of this research, and knows—but cannot do much about—that many communities and experiences gained no voice or attention despite his account. This concerns Chinese communities beyond the greater Sambas and Pontianak areas, where the bulk of the research concentrates, but also involves key sub-groups, whether delineated by a specific location (for example, the Chinese communities of Mempawah), political persuasion (those more pro-ROC [Taiwan], for instance), or class position (the rise of the super-rich Chinese under the New Order) within the greater Sambas and Pontianak Chinese areas.

The first two-thirds of the book is brilliant. Chapters 2 through 5 are gripping. They lead the reader on an epic roller-coaster ride of pain, suffering, elation, angst, loss, consciousness-raising, and hardship. There are passages that show historical anthropology at its best.

Chapter 6 is an excellent ethnography of local Chinese religion in Singkawang, but sits, however slightly, at odds with the main thrust of the book, caused by an apparent

abrupt turn in target audience, from scholars of Indonesia to those of Chinese religion, as if an anthropological account of Chinese communities must have a chapter on religion. Chapter 7 is a solid survey of post-Suharto political developments in West Kalimantan that lacks the emotional ruptures of the historical chapters (2–5).

In many respects, *Strangers At Home* is an event-centered history. And, fortunately for Hui, over the past decade or more, there has been a fair amount of historical work done on West Kalimantan that, when considered altogether, lays the foundation for Hui's own investigations. But Hui does not merely follow in footsteps. He breaks new ground by bringing fresh Chinese-language sources, both oral and written, to bear on events that are becoming increasingly known and understood. He goes beyond his predecessors in at least two important ways. The first is by shedding new light on the facts of these events. He discovers the group of four, for instance, responsible for setting up the anti-Japanese resistance movement among Chinese communities. The existence of this movement was used by the local Japanese wartime administration to justify its round up and execution of some 1,500 residents in West Kalimantan, many of whom were Chinese (locally, the official death toll is cited religiously at 21,037). With regards to the mid- to late-1960's communist rebellion against Suharto's New Order, Hui shows convincingly that Chinese members of the local Indonesian Communist Party (PKI, Partai Komunis Indonesia) played a greater organizational and tactical role than previously portrayed. This especially pertains to the brazen theft of weapons in July 1967 from an air force base in Sanggau Ledo, which awoke Suharto's generals to the severity of the security problem they faced in this neck of the woods. But more important than the discovery of obscure actors or the filling in of facts previously shrouded in obscurity, Hui clearly and deeply renders Chinese communities' emotional turmoil that these events produced and that previous research was unable to tap into and articulate. He digs up rare memoirs and tracks down interlocutors in China to help us understand the motivations of actors to join rebellious movements in the hilly interior, or the gut-wrenching personal responses to the destruction of entire communities, starting in 1967, by the New Order military, in connivance with a local Dayak militia, resulting in the deaths of thousands of, and the displacement of tens of thousands more, innocent bystanders in this truly dark period of West Kalimantan, and Indonesian, history.

The introductory chapter is remarkable. It opens with a brief biography of one man, a Chinese school principal in Indonesia in the 1950s, from which Hui then weaves histories of China, Indonesia (colonial and modern), and West Kalimantan into a seamless tapestry. He delves deeply into questions of language and semantics—for instance, problems surrounding the use of the word “Chinese” in English and in Chinese—and embeds his historical subject in post-structural incantations (I cannot pretend to have understood all of the theoretical posturing here, but I got the gist of it, I think). Chapter 2 is a beautiful retelling of these communities' coming-of-age, and their gaining of a historical consciousness as a community and about its role in history (as well as the future), spurred on by the rise of Chinese nationalism in the homeland. Here Hui tackles head on the often-heard criticism of Indonesian nationalists about the Chinese of Indonesia being more interested in or attracted to China than to Indonesia. As Hui readily admits, this accusation, especially for certain historical periods, rings true, or at least has a great deal of validity. The description of the Chinese “Five-Star Red Flag” flag-raising ceremony in Singkawang that opens the chapter is poignant and

rich in meaning. It captures the age's excitement for many in this community, leaving local authorities scrambling to make sense of the event (and what to do about it). Chapter 3 is a superb history of Chinese education in the province, and the role it played in galvanizing the shift "from one of provincial identification (such as Hokkien, Teochew, or Hakka) to identification with China [PRC, People's Republic of China] as a nation, and eventually to one of political and ideological identification (as in pro-PRC or pro-ROC), especially with the establishment of the PRC in 1949" (pp. 67–68).

Chapter 4 brings the violence of the Dayak militia-led raids against the Chinese frighteningly back to life, through the use of personal letters of people directly affected by the mayhem and touching interviews with informants who only opened up to the ethnographer because of a bond forged through trust (p. 132). A Chapter 5 highlight is the use of a rare memoir by a former rebel fighter (from PGRS, Pasukan Gerilya Rakyat Sarawak, Sarawak People's Guerrilla Force) that was written as, in Hui's words, "an attempt at recovering the losses suffered as a social collectively through the codification of memory ... As such, to say that we are recovering a place in history for those who died helplessly and meaninglessly is also to institute for them a collective set of imaginary descendants that will perpetuate their memory" (p. 157).

It is common today for book reviewers to lament the exorbitant prices publishers are charging for their books, priced well beyond the reach of the individual consumer. *Strangers at Home* is no exception. But at least in this case, the author was seemingly unconstrained by the near-ubiquitous 100,000-word limit to which publishers chain first-time authors. I found reading Hui's lengthy exposition refreshing and a pleasant change of pace in this regard.