

Foreword

It gives me much pleasure to recommend this unusual book to anyone interested in the modern history of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia and specifically in Indonesia.

Most books about Chinese Indonesians address societal issues in the broad rather than the refracted experiences of individual lives. Social scientists and historians tend, almost inevitably, to make generalizations about Chinese Indonesians as a minority group. These can easily reinforce the popular negative stereotypes which so often distort the lived experience of individual people. Personal memoirs help to provide an antidote to the poison of these stereotypes.

The few books which do focus on individual lives of Chinese Indonesians are usually autobiographies (or biographies) of men who have played a prominent role in politics or business. Very little has been written by or about individual ethnic Chinese women. The memoirs of Koo Hui-Lan and Queeny Chang are the best-known of those available in English.¹

This volume is a welcome addition to the field. It is a memoir of a Chinese Indonesian family in the twentieth century. Described as a “family history”, it is based on extensive interviews which Stuart Pearson has edited and recast into first-person narratives.

The principal “voice” is that of his mother-in-law, An Utari Sudibjo, who was born in the east Javanese town of Kediri in 1912 under the name Tan Sian Nio. When Pearson began his project, An was more than

¹ Koo, Hui-lan [Madame Wellington Koo]. 1943. An autobiography as told to Mary Van Rensselaer Thayer, New York: Dial Press [later version published as Koo, Madame Wellington (with Isabella Taves) 1975. *No feast lasts forever*, New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Co.]. Chang, Queeny. 1981. *Memories of a Nonya*, Singapore: Eastern Universities Press. Blussé, Leonard. 2002. *Retour Amoy: Anny Tan, Een vrouwenleven in Indonesië, Nederland en China*, Amsterdam: Balans.

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90 years old and her husband Eddie Sudibjo was in his eighties. One of the interesting aspects of the book is the unusually long span of An's memories. Her narrative is punctuated by great events that influenced the course of her life: the vicissitudes of the sugar industry in Kediri in the 1920s; the economic depression of the 1930s; the Japanese invasion and occupation of Indonesia in 1942; the Indonesian struggle for independence after the Japanese surrender in 1945; the dislocation caused by the campaign against Dutch economic interests in 1957; the inflation and political instability of Sukarno's Guided Democracy from 1959 to 1965; and the subsequent frightening transition to Suharto's New Order. An's account of her life reflects upon these fast-changing contexts.

She was born and grew to adulthood in what was then the Netherlands Indies. Despite graduating from the Dutch Chinese elementary school (*Hollandsche-Chineesche School*, or HCS) in Kediri with results that ranked her second in the entire colony, she was unable to follow her older brother into a prestigious Dutch secondary school (*Hogereburgerschool*, or HBS) because of her father's bankruptcy. At the age of twelve, An was sent instead to the Dutch Chinese Teachers' College (*Hollandsche Chineesche Kweekschool*) in Batavia, the colonial capital. After five years of study there she qualified as a primary school teacher with the additional distinction, shared with only one other student in her cohort of about thirty, of qualifying to teach in the European elementary schools (*Europeesche Lagere School*, or ELS) as well as the HCS. In the following three years, while teaching at the HCS in Jember in East Java, she successfully studied by correspondence to become a high school teacher of mathematics and physics. She was active in the teachers' union (*Nederlands Indisch Onderwijzers Genootschap*, or NIOG), rising to be national Secretary in 1940.

In 1939 she became deputy principal of the HCS in Salatiga and soon afterwards, while still in her twenties, was promoted to be principal of the school when the Dutch principal was called up for military service. This was remarkable progress for a young woman in a male-dominated colonial society.

The Japanese occupation of Indonesia interrupted An's stellar career. Soon after the Dutch surrender in March 1942, all Dutch-medium schools were compelled to close. An locked up her school and made her way to Tanggul (near Jember), where her father was by now supervising six rice mills for a cousin. Accompanying her on this journey was her future husband Eddie (born Kang Hoo Bie), who had been a boarder at her primary school in Jember and was now a student at a high school in Solo which had

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also been forced to close. She soon found herself responsible for feeding a detachment of Japanese soldiers who were billeted in Tanggul. In 1944 she married Eddie, who was nine years her junior. Their son John (one of the “voices” in the book) was born in Jember in October 1945, shortly after the Indonesian declaration of independence. In mid-1947 they escaped from the insecurity of East Java and settled in Jakarta, where their second child Ingrid (later to be Pearson’s wife and another “voice”) was born.

An resumed her career in Jakarta teaching mathematics and physics at a combined junior and senior high school, where she was soon promoted to principal when the Dutch head resigned to leave Indonesia. As Ingrid’s birth approached, she had to stop classroom teaching and was deployed to a special task force translating school text books from Dutch into Indonesian. An was responsible for the translation of the mathematics and physics textbooks, which she then used when in August 1949 she returned to active teaching of mathematics and physics to trainee teachers at a new senior teachers’ college (*Sekolah Guru Atas*). Within a few years she was principal of the college, where she stayed until 1967. Meanwhile her husband Eddie had found employment with the Dutch airline KLM and did management training which led to a career in civil aviation.

Nevertheless, this memoir is more than the story of their careers. We learn much about An’s Chinese families and their relationships with indigenous Indonesians. Unlike Koo Hui-Lan and Queeny Chang, who were born into two of the wealthiest and most prestigious Chinese families in the Indies, An had to work for a living. Although she was not from their social stratosphere, she is overly modest in claiming that she is “just an ordinary individual”. Her maternal grandmother was a member of the Djie family in Kediri, one of Java’s great peranakan dynasties and in which there were numerous Chinese officers. Indeed, she mentions that her uncle (probably great-uncle) Djie Thay Hien, who was *Majoor der Chineezen* in Kediri, had a car with a chauffeur as early as 1916. Her own father was able to borrow the car during Chinese New Year holidays so they could visit relatives to pay their respects. Djie Thay Hien’s son and a brother were both appointed as a *Kapitein der Chineezen* in Kediri. Another brother was the opium revenue farmer in Madiun. Three Djie cousins — also probably first cousins of An’s mother — featured in a 1935 *Who’s Who of the Chinese of Java*.²

² Rush, James R. 1990. *Opium to Java: Revenue Farming and Chinese Enterprise in Colonial Indonesia, 1860–1910*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, p. 55.

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An's father's family was not in that top bracket but the Dutch education that she and her siblings received put them in the upper stratum of twentieth-century *peranakan* Chinese society. She and her older brother Tan Swan Bing — who was already important enough to be included in the same *Who's Who*³ — themselves achieved high status but through educational achievement rather than ascription.

The Chinese community in Kediri was much smaller and more provincial than those of Semarang and Medan where Koo Hui-Lan and Queeny Chang were born and raised. An's family was also closer to the local indigenous Indonesians than their families. At the time of An's birth, her parents were living in Ngronggot, a small rural village close to Kediri.

Her father enmeshed the village into the wider cash economy: he developed local quarries and employed local people to build roads into the village; purchased the copra output of the district and sold it in Kediri; built a large house which became the family home and a general store, run by his widowed younger sister, where the Javanese villagers were able to spend the money they received for their copra to buy previously unobtainable goods; and built sixteen more shops from which he derived a rental income. He even bought a gamelan orchestra and paid for a teacher to train local villagers to play, so that every market day there would be performances of the Javanese shadow puppet theatre (*wayang kulit*) accompanied by the gamelan.⁴ For the first twenty years of her life, although she spent many of them away at school in Kediri and Batavia, this Javanese village was An's home base. She remembers it with nostalgia and describes it vividly.

She is less nostalgic about Kasminah, the 15-year-old Javanese girl little older than herself, who was "given" by An's mother to be her father's concubine. Here is a real-life version of the *nyai* (concubine) portrayed in Pramoedya's *This Earth of Mankind*, albeit without the heroic aspects. Their three children were adopted as full members of the family. Kasminah lived in An's maternal grandmother's house in Kediri until Kasminah's death in 1971. During the revolutionary struggle, An's parents fled Tanggul for the

Tan, Hong Boen 1935. *Orang-Orang Tionghoa Jang Terkemoea di Java* [Prominent Chinese in Java], Solo: The Biographical Publishing Centre, pp. 85–6.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴ Pausacker, Helen. 2005. "Peranakan Chinese and Wayang in Java", in Tim Lindsey and Helen Pausacker (eds.), *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*, Singapore and Clayton: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Monash Asia Institute, pp. 185–208.

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relative security of Kediri and for many years lived under the same roof as Kasminah.

In Ngronggot, An was influenced by a Javanese mystic who put a “protective spell” over the family house, including its contents and family members. When she was sick with malaria, *Pak Kiai* Koermen meditated for her and her health improved immediately. She believes that, together with an excellent diet in her childhood, the psychic and spiritual healing of this mystic was responsible for her good health over her long life.

Much later, in the 1960s, An and her husband found another Javanese spiritual guide, Raden Mas Soedjono (or Mas Djon), following him on pilgrimages to Pelabuhan Ratu on the south coast of Java, where they would meditate overnight. When she and Eddie adopted Indonesian names, it was Mas Djon who selected the names for them. During the crisis period of 1965–66, they would go to Mas Djon every night and meditate, sometimes until one or two o’clock in the morning. Once again An felt “cocooned in a protective force”. She and Eddie believe that, without the help of Mas Djon, they would have died during the vicious aftermath of the attempted coup. It is worth noting here that in their attachment to Javanese mysticism, the Sudibjos were by no means unique. Other ethnic Chinese have been active in various Javanese mystical sects and also the Theosophical Society.

The Sudibjos lived in the fashionable Menteng district of Jakarta for twenty years in a house at Jalan Jogja 7 which was large enough to hold several families. For several years Jan Nielsen, a Dutch teacher, and his wife Gerda were fellow tenants. Long after the Niensens’ emigration to Australia in 1951 they adopted the two Sudibjo children when they went to Australia to study.

When Dutch schools were closed by presidential decree in December 1957, An obtained government approval to establish her own private school Harapan Kita at Jalan Jogja 7. At first the school had only three students, including her son John, but it grew to about eighty students by 1967. The school was barely profitable on an accounting basis but paid off as an investment in elite social networking. An augmented her SGA salary by running a catering business. She also invested her energies in managing a Jakarta restaurant during the 1962 Asian Games.

For most of their time at Jalan Jogja 7, the house was shared with Indonesian army officers. In the last ten years, their relationship with these officers was tense. In 1967, when An was on holiday in Australia, one of these officers took advantage of her absence to take over the house and

evict the school. This was the spur to An's emigration to Australia, where she has lived for the past forty years.

In Australia, An resumed her side career in catering on the basis of her experience in Tanggul and Jakarta by buying the Toby Coffee Lounge in central Sydney. When forced to vacate the premises two years later, she bought another Sydney restaurant and renamed it Warung Indonesia. At the same time Eddie bought a fish shop business in what An called an "unsavoury" location. The two businesses continued in competition for three years until the building in which Eddie carried on his fish business was destroyed by fire.

One of the interesting features of the book is that An, Eddie and their children all found a home in Australia. It was, of course, not uncommon for Chinese Indonesians to leave Indonesia to find a better life elsewhere. In the 1950s and 1960s most emigrated to China or the Netherlands. For a Dutch-educated *peranakan* like An, China would have been an unusual destination. Her sister Roostien qualified for Netherlands citizenship because her husband was one of the few ethnic Chinese who had been naturalized as Dutch citizens (*gelijkgesteld*) during the colonial period. In 1962 An herself was offered a teaching job and a house in Holland by a Dutchman, her former headmaster, who also offered to sponsor her for Dutch citizenship. She did not consider the offer seriously, because Eddie did not want to live in such a cold climate. Later on, in the mid-1980s, when Warung Indonesia was in financial difficulty, she went to the Netherlands and tried to claim a Dutch pension. The claim was then rejected because in 1976 she had already become an Australian citizen.

In the early 1960s, the restrictive immigration policy (better known as the White Australia Policy) was still in operation in Australia. At that time it would not have been possible for An and Eddie to emigrate but it was possible for Asian students like their children to study in Australia. To ensure a longer right to residence, it was agreed that the Nielsens should adopt them. By 1967, the White Australia Policy was beginning to crumble but it was still difficult for Asians to settle in Australia. An came to Australia on a three-month visitor's visa, which she could apply to extend three months at a time up to a total of twelve months. Remarkably, they bought the coffee lounge under the cloud of that uncertain immigration status.

When the year was about to expire, An returned to Jakarta and obtained another similar visitor's visa. It was obviously impracticable to continue running the coffee lounge on such a basis. Fortunately a Dutch customer

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introduced them to an Australian friend, Senator Tony Mulvihill, who was at the time chairman of the Commonwealth Immigration Advisory Council. Senator Mulvihill pressed their case to the Minister for Immigration, who in early 1970 granted them two-year temporary residence visas. Their visas were repeatedly extended until 1976, by which time the White Australia Policy had been officially abandoned. They were then granted permanent residence and allowed to proceed directly to be naturalized as Australian citizens.

Unlike so much of the genre, this memoir is no hagiography. It is in fact a remarkably unvarnished portrait of An. She does not spare herself, nor does her family spare her. A great deal of dirty family washing is displayed for all to see: her controlling and manipulative qualities, her disputes over money with family and friends, and her arguments with her husband. This is a portrait with warts and all but in the final analysis we, along with her family, end up admiring her extraordinary life and her resilience. She is not “just an ordinary individual”. We can be grateful for her Dutch colonial education and her ability to reflect so objectively on her own experience and the events which have influenced her life.⁵ We should also be grateful to her son-in-law who has made it possible for us to share her story.

Charles A. Coppel

University of Melbourne

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⁵ Govaars, Ming. 2005. *Dutch Colonial Education: The Chinese Experience in Indonesia, 1900–1942*, Singapore: Chinese Heritage Centre.