

CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE FROM THE CHINESE 'DIASPORA' IN INDONESIA

Pamela Allen (University of Tasmania)

Since the fall of Suharto a number of Chinese-Indonesian writers have begun to write as Chinese-Indonesians, some using their Chinese names, some writing in Mandarin. New literary activities include the gathering, publishing and translating (from Mandarin) of short stories and poetry by Chinese-Indonesians. Pribumi Indonesians too have privileged Chinese ethnicity in their works in new and compelling ways. To date little of this new Chinese-Indonesian literary activity has been documented or evaluated in English. This paper begins to fill that gap by examining the ways in which recent literary works by and about Chinese-Indonesians give expression to their ethnic identity.

Introduction

Since colonial times the Chinese have been subjected to othering in Indonesia on account of their cultural and religious difference, on account of their perceived dominance in the nation's economy and (paradoxically, as this seems to contradict that economic

dominance) on account of their purported complicity with Communism. The first outbreak of racial violence towards the Chinese, engineered by the Dutch United East Indies Company, was in Batavia in 1740.¹

The perceived hybridity of *peranakan* Chinese (those born in Indonesia) was encapsulated in the appellation used to describe them in pre-Independence Java: *Cina wurung, londa durung, Jawa tanggung* ('no longer a Chinese, not yet a Dutchman, a half-baked Javanese').² 'The Chinese are everywhere *with* us, but they are not *of* us...'³ As Mackie points out:

the entire Sino-Indonesian minority has been subject to various forms of discrimination and exclusion from educational, social, and employment rights, ostensibly on the grounds of promoting the economic advance of the *pribumi* {native}, measures that the wealthy Chinese have been powerless to prevent or protest.⁴

Scholarly analysis of issues confronting the Chinese minority in post-colonial Indonesia has focussed upon the nexus between ethnicity, nationality and identity and the ways in which the Chinese "difference" is seen to problematise notions of a coherent nation-building project in Indonesia.

Chinese-Indonesians in the New Order

After assuming the Indonesian presidency in 1966, following the attempted putsch (officially constructed as an "abortive Communist coup") which led to the fall of his

¹ Ricklefs, Merle, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1981), p. 87.

² Blussé, Leonard, 'The Role of Indonesian Chinese in Shaping Modern Indonesian Life: A Conference in Retrospect', *Proceedings of the Symposium held at Cornell University in Conjunction with the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute July 13-15, 1990* (Cornell Southeast Asia Project, 1991), p. 5.

³ Rush, James. 'Placing the Chinese in Java on the Eve of the Twentieth Century', *Ibid.*, p. 21.

predecessor Sukarno, President Suharto issued his now infamous 1967 decree which forbade any activities pertaining to Chinese religion or culture. Chinese schools and organisations were banned. Chinese personal and business names were forbidden. The use of Chinese script was banned, except for the dual-text newspaper *Harian Indonesia*, which was given a strict licence to publish news in both Indonesian and Mandarin (four pages in each language). (On the customs forms to be filled in upon entering Indonesia ‘Chinese printed material’ is still listed next to weapons, ammunition and drugs, suggesting that the language was/is perceived as being very dangerous indeed.) The aggressive witch-hunt and victimisation of Chinese-Indonesians following the attempted putsch, justified on the grounds of their alleged complicity with Communism, transformed itself into an insidious silencing, intimidation and discrediting of Chinese throughout Suharto’s New Order regime. At the same time Chinese involvement in business was permitted and even encouraged, but a significant portion of the profits remained in the hands of New Order cronies.

While the Dutch colonial government had adopted an anti-integrationist policy, the New Order favoured an assimilation program, the so-called *Program Pembauran*, ‘the basic policy for the solution of the Chinese problem’, which was predicated upon the idea that Chinese ethnicity was incompatible with the ‘national personality’⁵ and that erasure was therefore the only viable solution. Under this program intermarriage and conversion to Islam were actively encouraged.

⁴ Mackie, Jamie. ‘Towkays and Tycoons: The Chinese in Indonesian Economic Life in the 1920s and 1980s’, *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁵ Heryanto, Ariel, ‘Ethnic Identities and Erasure: Chinese Indonesians in Public Culture’, in Joel S. Kahn (ed.), *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand* (Singapore, ISEAS, 1998), p. 103.

In the early 1990s, coinciding with the growth in the Indonesian middle class, there were signs of a softening in attitude, at least at the official level, towards Chinese-Indonesians. (A significant number of successful media figures, for example, were Chinese.) In 1997 some private schools in Jakarta began offering Chinese language to both Chinese and *pribumi* Indonesians as an extracurricular subject. But these tentative signs of change were insignificant by comparison with the dramatic changes wrought upon the lives of Chinese-Indonesians during the upheaval (now known in Indonesia as *Tragedi Mei 1998*, ‘The Tragedy of May 1998’) that began in mid-February 1998 and culminated in the resignation of Suharto in May of that year. This four-month period was marked by appalling violence against Chinese. Rioters robbed and burned Chinese houses, shops, factories and warehouses and attacked Chinese in the streets. Many Chinese women were raped. The riots were met with waves of protests to the Indonesian government from Chinese communities throughout the world.

Suharto’s resignation then led to a space-clearing, which suddenly provided opportunities for Chinese-Indonesians (estimated at eleven million in 1999) to openly discuss their experiences as an oppressed minority. For some, it was like going ‘out of the darkness, into the light (*habis gelap, terbitlah terang*).⁶ This space-clearing was extended on 17 January 2000 when President Wahid officially revoked the presidential decree of 1967. Chinese-Indonesians were thus able to openly celebrate Chinese New Year for the first time in thirty three years.

⁶ Liem, Yusiu, *Prasangka Terhadap Etnis Cina: Sebuah Intisari* (Jakarta, Penerbit Djambatan, 2000), p. x.

Literary activity in Indonesia

Ever since the 'beginning' of modern Indonesian literature in the early twentieth century, Indonesian writers have engaged with the project of creating and defining Indonesian identity, an endeavour that developed out of the nationalist movement. Literature has come to be understood as not merely a product for consumption and entertainment, but also as a significant part of the project of nation-building. Most serious writers have engaged both with the mission of creating a new literature and with the interrogation of issues of national identity. It is a trend which continues to inform Indonesian literature in the twenty first century. The best-known Indonesian literary works from the late twentieth century - the novels of Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Y.B. Mangunwijaya, the short stories of Seno Gumira Ajidarma, the poetry of Rendra, Putu Oka and Wiji Thukul and the plays of Ratna Sarumpaet and Riantiarno - are all the products of socially-engaged writers grappling with what it means to be 'Indonesian'.

Sino-Malay literature: Literature written by *peranakan* Chinese flourished at the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, thus preceding the publication of modern literature by indigenous Indonesians. Most *peranakan* works at that time were translations of Chinese classics such as *Sam Kok* and *Sampek Engtai* or adaptations of traditional Malay *syair*. The best-known early *peranakan* writer was the journalist Lie Kim Hok.⁷

The Sino-Malay novel emerged from the 1870s onward, paralleling the establishment of the first Chinese-owned printing presses. Two important early novels,

⁷ Suryadinata, Leo, *The Culture of the Chinese Minority in Indonesia* (Singapore, Times Books International, 1997) p. 199.

published in 1903, were Gouw Peng Liang's *Lo Fen Koei*, the story of a wealthy Chinese opium farmer who takes a poor man's daughter as his concubine, and Thio Tjin Boen's *Tjerita Oey See*, about a Chinese woman who elopes with a Javanese army officer and converts to Islam.⁸ But because the first language of these *peranakan* writers was low Malay, *Melayu rendah* (*laag Maleisch*), market Malay, or *Melayu pasar* (*passermaleisch*), much of it received scant attention from Indonesian critics, who reserved their praise for writing in the court-derived high Malay, *Melayu tinggi* (*hoog Maleisch*), favoured by the recognised publishing houses. (However in 1927, Kwee Tek Hoay still had the courage to write, 'We believe that Low Malay will eventually overcome and completely destroy Riau Malay or Ophuysen Malay which is now still protected by the Administration.'⁹)

Peranakan literature - novels, plays, short stories and essays, largely about *peranakan* society - reached its zenith in the 1920s and 1930s, a time of heightened Chinese nationalism in Java, when Chinese schools, organisations and newspapers also flourished.¹⁰ The 1920s also marked a shift in language use between *peranakan* and *pribumi* writers. It was then that the Malay used by *peranakan* writers became generally known as *Melayu-Tionghoa*, Sino-Malay, and it was regarded as a sort of 'sub-language' of Malay with lexical and grammatical differences from *pribumi* Malay.¹¹

An important - and enduring - element of *peranakan* literature has been the kungfu novels (usually known as *cerita silat* in Indonesia). *Peranakan* Chinese have

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Maier, Henk, 'Forms of Censorship in the Dutch Indies: The Marginalization of Chinese-Malay Literature', *Proceedings of the Symposium held at Cornell University*, p. 76.

¹⁰ Among the well-known *peranakan* writers of that time, Suryadinata lists Tjoe Bou San, Kwee Tok Hoay, Soe Lie Piet, Liem Khing Hoo, Pouw Kioe An, Ong Ping Lok, Njoo Cheong Seng and Tan Tek Ho. (Suryadinata, *The culture of the Chinese minority in Indonesia*, p. 200.)

¹¹ Ibid., p. 198.

been reading kungfu novels in Malay (translated or adapted from the works of well-known Chinese kungfu writers) since before World War II. After the war the novels were serialised in both Indonesian and Chinese newspapers in Indonesia (usually under the name of the translator rather than the original author). Since 1965 they have been published in pocket book form, and although the print run is small and the quality - of both translation and printing - is often poor, they continue to attract a dedicated readership.¹²

Thanks to the meticulous work of two scholars in particular - Claudine Salmon and Leo Suryadinata - much of the early writing of both *peranakan* and *totok* Chinese has now been documented and critically analysed.

Salmon's bibliography *Literature in Malay by the Chinese of Indonesia* lists over 2500 titles of plays, poems and translations, incorporating the work of over 800 authors.

Suryadinata, perhaps the best-known commentator on ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, includes discussion of *peranakan* writing in a number of his books, and has devoted one book to the topic - *Sastra peranakan Tionghoa Indonesia (The Literature of Indonesian-born Chinese)*. His book *The culture of the Chinese minority in Indonesia* contains an appendix listing *peranakan* Chinese writers and their works and another listing kungfu novels in *bahasa Indonesia*.

Salmon and Suryadinata's commentary effectively ends at 1965. Chinese-Indonesians who did continue to write during the New Order - such as the poet Abdul Hadi - on the whole projected themselves and were constructed by others as 'Indonesian'. They thus assimilated as writers as they did as citizens, and their ethnicity never featured as part of their work. Despite efforts by a small number of writers to revitalise 'low

¹² Ibid., pp. 223-232.

Malay' literature in the early 1960s¹³ the category 'Chinese-Indonesian literature' for all intents and purposes ceased to exist. It was subjected to the same process of erasure as Chinese ethnicity.

Sino-Indonesian Literature post-Suharto

In *reformasi* Indonesia Chinese-Indonesian literature arguably has the status of a 'subculture' (some might say 'diasporic culture'), on a par with regional cultures which, in the spirit of regional autonomy (*otonomi daerah*) are currently undergoing a process of revitalisation and re-emergence.

Soon after Suharto's resignation two organisations of Chinese-Indonesian writers were established – *Perhimpunan seni budaya Ibu Pertiwi* in late 1998 and *Perhimpunan penulis Tionghoa Indonesia* in 1999. One of the pioneers in the revitalisation process was Wilson Tjandinegara – dubbed by Taufiq Ismail as an 'activist poet with three "strings to his bow" (*penyair aktivis tiga jurus*): 'an advocate of intercultural contact, a translator of literature from Indonesian to Mandarin and vice versa, and a poet.'¹⁴

Wilson, who still uses his Indonesian name¹⁵ rather than his original name (Chen Tung Long), began his project of translating Mandarin literature into Indonesian before the end of the Suharto regime. In 1996 he translated from Mandarin and published *Bisikan Hati*, an anthology of poetry by the Chinese poet Teo Un. Wilson's most recent contributions, both published by Komunitas Sastra Indonesia in 2001, are Jeanne Yap's

¹³ For example Pramoedya Ananta Toer's work 'Sastra assimilatif: Sastra pra-Indonesia', which was published in *Bintang Timur* in late 1963

¹⁴ Pejuang hubungan antar budaya, penerjemah karya sastra timbal balik Indonesia-Mandarin sekaligus penyair
(Cited in 'Darah daging sastra Wilson Tjandinegara',
http://cybersastra.net/edisi_mei2002/mei2002_1.htm)

anthology *Lelaki adalah sebingkai lukisan* and Ming Fang's collection *Janji berjumpa di Kota Pegunungan*. One of the consequences of Wilson's work in producing these volumes, as well as the earlier *Menyangga dunia di atas bulu mati* and *Resonansi Indonesia* (Komunitas Sastra Indonesia, 2000) has been a resurgence in interest in dual-language poetry readings. In his discussion of Wilson's work Aspulis suggests that 'These days, dual language readings have become an expected part of every national literary event.'¹⁶

Sapardi Djoko Damono regards the significance of Wilson's project as being that the process of transforming poetry from Mandarin into Indonesian *ipso facto* makes that work a part of body of Indonesian literature.¹⁷ It is a view with which some may differ, but it allows us to 'imagine' Indonesian literature in a new way.

Chinese-Indonesian Identity

One of the most telling aspects of the polemics surrounding the issue of Chinese identity in Indonesia is the very language in which it is embedded. The Chinese, their culture, their religion, arguably their very existence in Indonesia, have been branded by colonialists, scholars and politicians alike as 'the Chinese problem' (*masalah Cina*). While this has not necessarily become a self-fulfilling prophesy, it is nonetheless true that we are to some extent at least shaped, influenced and defined by the labels that others put on us. In the case of the Chinese in Indonesia, it certainly seems to be a case of 'once a

¹⁵ What Veven Wardhana calls 'a name bestowed by the government' (*nama pemberian negara*) in his story 'Panggil aku Pheng Hwa'

¹⁶ Kini, pembacaan dwibahasa menjadi bagian yang ditunggu hampir di setiap acara sastra nasional. (Aspulis, 'Dua Antologi Jeanne Yap dan Ming Fang Curahan Hati Penuh Makna', *cybersastra.net*: situs sastra nusantara <http://cybersastra.net/cgi-bin/naskah/viewesai.cgi?category=5&id=1014846568>)

¹⁷ 'Pengantar ringkas', in Ahmadun Yosi Herfanda, Wowok Hesti Prabowo, Jeanne Yap, Cecillia K and Wilson Tjandinegara (eds.), *Resonansi Indonesia* (Jakarta, Komunitas Sastra Indonesia, 2000), p. 8.

masalah, always a *masalah*'. (Or, to look at it another way, as Ignatius Wibowo recently asked, 'At what point does a person's Chinese-ness cease to be?')¹⁸)

A discussion of the identity issues that emerge from recent fiction and poetry must be contextualised within an understanding of the heterogeneity of Chinese-Indonesian 'identity'. The fixedness, the *pembekuan*, of that identity is a myth perpetuated in part by the governance of the New Order, in part by the overt racism prevalent in some quarters of contemporary Indonesian society and, it must be admitted, in part by some of the *peranakan* Chinese themselves. In an environment predicated upon an us/them binary, the 'them' must be a definable, knowable 'Other'. In the case of Chinese-Indonesians the term *masalah Cina* has served to 'explain' Chineseness and to justify prejudice against them. During the Suharto regime there was no space to deconstruct the term; in post-Suharto Indonesia one might hope that the label might be subjected to a scrutiny that will reveal it for what it is: a catch-all phrase that allows us to think we 'know' Chinese-Indonesians.

The reality is that, as a category, 'Chinese-Indonesian' is heterogeneous: as, indeed, is the category *pribumi*.¹⁹ *Peranakan* Chinese in Indonesia are geographically, religiously and culturally diverse, and differently absorbed into local cultures. It is erroneous to talk about 'the Sino-Indonesian community' in Indonesia. Such a

¹⁸ Sampai kapan ke-cina-an seseorang berhenti?

(Wibowo, I., 'Kapan ke-Cina-an akan berhenti?', *Mitra*, no. 4 {March 2000}, p. 8).

¹⁹ As Ariel Heryanto wryly puts it, the tendency to homogenise *pribumi*-ness leads to situations such as 'the San Francisco-born and bred Ahmad or Fatimah, whose grandfather was Javanese and who doesn't speak Indonesian, suddenly becoming '*pribumi*' the minute she sets foot on Indonesian soil for the first time, as an adult tourist.' (Ahmad atau Fatimah yang dilahirkan dari kakek Jawa di San Francisco, dibesarkan di sana, dan tak biasa berbahasa Indonesia, mendadak jadi '*pribumi*' ketika mendarat pertama kali di Indonesia sebagai turis sudah dewasa.

('Nonpribumi: Dibiarkan, Dibaurkan, atau Dibubarkan?', in Sindhunata (ed.), *Mengenang Y.B.Mangunwijaya: Pergulatan Intelektual dalam Era Kegelisahan* {Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1999}, p. 193).

‘community’ doesn’t exist.²⁰ Where group recognition exists, it is often enforced by external hostility and pressure.²¹ Affiliations with Chinese culture, language and ethnicity vary enormously.²² Some anecdotal examples will help illustrate this. Three years ago I spoke with a lecturer in Mandarin, a Chinese-Indonesian from Jakarta, who was adamant that Chinese-Indonesians should forget about their Chinese ethnicity in the interests of a harmonious and homogeneous Indonesian nation. She was almost proud that her children speak no Mandarin and can’t communicate with their grandmother. There are other Chinese-Indonesians, some high-profile, such as the film-maker Teguh Karya, for whom ethnicity is simply not an issue. Their Chineseness is irrelevant.²³ The playwright Riantiarno, invited to attend the 1990 symposium at Cornell University on the role of Indonesian Chinese in shaping modern Indonesian life, said he was happy to have been invited but felt quite puzzled about what he should talk about. He did not feel he was a Chinese, but rather an Indonesian from Cirebon, saying, ‘All I know, as founder of Koma theatre, about the Chinese in Indonesia is that there are lots of rich Chinese around but few who want to sponsor my productions.’²⁴ At the same forum Harry Tjan Silalahi maintained that attempts to preserve the ethnic Chinese population group as a *suku* might actually imperil the process of Indonesian nation building; he maintained that ‘Chineseness’ should gradually evaporate and merge into the Indonesian national culture. Raised as a Catholic *peranakan* in a Javanese environment, recipient of a Dutch language

²⁰ Ibid., p. 195

²¹ Lev, Daniel, ‘Becoming an *orang Indonesia sejati*: The Political Journey of Yap Thiam Hien’, *Proceedings of the Symposium held at Cornell University*, p. 98.

²² The Chinese came to Indonesia from all parts of China, bringing their linguistic and cultural diversity with them. For example, from the northernmost Fujian Province came the Hokcia, Henghua, Hokkian dan Teociu, from Guangdong Province came the Cantonese and from Guangxi Province came the Kwongsai.

²³ However, Teguh Karya suffered severe depression and a stroke after the events of May 1998 and was confined to a wheelchair until his death at the age of 67 on December 11 2001.

education, and adopted into a Batak family, he feels himself a child of several worlds. In some circles Sino-Indonesians invoke the terms *kasno* (a person who hides his Chineseness) and *kirno* (a person who denies his Chineseness). The denial or effacement of Chinese ethnicity represents perhaps one end of the 'identity' continuum. At the other end are those people often referred to as *totok*, who are Chinese oriented culturally. Some high-profile businessmen fall into this category: Liem Sioe Liong (Sudono Salim), Mochtar Riady, The Nin King, Go Swie Kie; and Eka Tjipta Wijaya.²⁵ A new, post-Suharto, perspective is evidenced in the response of a Chinese-Indonesian acquaintance: 'Oh well, all sorts of people are coming out of the woodwork now and declaring themselves to be of Chinese ethnicity. It's become the trendy thing to do!'

What then should we expect, if anything, from a body of work written by Indonesians of Chinese ethnicity? Should we expect, or only expect, an overt engagement with identity issues? Must Chinese-Indonesians only write about their ethnicity, because that is how non-Chinese Indonesians 'know' them? To put it another way, do we expect a Batak writer, a Balinese writer, a Minangkabau writer to only write about what makes them Batak, Balinese or Minangkabau respectively? If regional literature uses or draws heavily upon regional languages, then is it to be expected that Chinese-Indonesian literature will use or draw heavily upon Mandarin? Is literature written in Indonesian by Chinese-Indonesians to be understood differently than that written in Indonesian by *pribumi* Indonesians? (We need to remember the important fact

²⁴ Blussé, 'The Role of Indonesian Chinese in Shaping Modern Indonesian Life: A Conference in Retrospect', p. 5.

²⁵ Tan, Mély G., 'The Social and Cultural Dimensions of the Role of Ethnic Chinese in Indonesian Society', *Proceedings of the Symposium held at Cornell University*, p. 120. There is, however, considerable debate about the relevance of the *peranakan/totok* dichotomy in contemporary Indonesia. See, for example, Liem, *Prasangka Terhadap Etnis Cina*, p. 3, p. 73.

that the younger Sino-Indonesian generation speaks and thinks only in the Indonesian language.) Is literature translated from Mandarin into Indonesian – part of Wilson Tjandinegara’s project – still ‘authentic’ Chinese-Indonesian literature? Where does Chinese-ness end and Indonesian-ness begin? These are questions which have been addressed by, among others, Melani Budianta, in an attempt to determine whether literature by Chinese-Indonesians should be understood as Chinese-Indonesian literature or simply as part of Indonesian literature. The questions we need to keep asking are, what does the epithet ‘Chinese-‘ mean here, and how, if at all, does it shape the way we read and understand these works? Or, to put it another way, is the author dead?

In what follows I examine a number of literary works that engage with the so-called *masalah Cina* in the post-Suharto period. Some of the works are written by Chinese-Indonesians (*jin hua*), and there are also works by *pribumi* Indonesians. There are stories that address issues of broad social concern and others that more overtly address issues central to the *masalah Cina*, in particular the possibility and nature of friendship between Chinese-Indonesians and *pribumi* Indonesians. I examine three specific issues: first, the trend towards revivification of Chinese culture in post-Suharto Indonesia; second, ways in which the *masalah Cina* is invoked in recent fiction and poetry, both by Chinese-Indonesian and by *pribumi* writers; and third, literary engagement – again, by both Chinese-Indonesian and *pribumi* writers - with the tragedy of 1998.

Revivification of Sino-Indonesian cultural forms (*Resinifikasi*)

A phenomenon that has been a feature of Chinese-Indonesian identity since the fall of Suharto is the revival of cultural forms that were banned or discouraged under the New Order regime. The most visible, and probably the most symbolic, of these is the *Barongsai*, the Chinese Lion Dance, which has come to epitomise the purported freedom of expression now granted the Chinese in Indonesia. (Some ethnic Chinese, however, have remarked on the ‘kitsch’ and ‘tackiness’ of the performance.²⁶)

To commemorate Chinese New Year in January 2001, the television station RCTI screened the Chinese historical romance film *Lo Fen Koei*, based on the novel by Go Peng Liang and adapted for the screen by the highly-regarded writer Afrizal Malna (recently dubbed the ‘pioneer’ of the literary ‘Generation of 2000’²⁷). The national daily *Kompas* printed a half-page pictorial display of *Imlek* (New Year) celebrations, as well as a large feature article, as if, to quote the online magazine *Mandiri*, ‘to emphasise that your [Chinese citizens’] existence is acknowledged in this chaotic republic of ours.’²⁸ For its part, *Mandiri Online* established *Imleknet*, a column designed to provide information about Chinese New Year and Chinese culture.²⁹

A performance genre with an overt political sentiment is the Chinese puppet performance *wayang Po Tay Hie* which was banned by the New Order government, but is now being revived and presented to appreciative audiences. Founded around three

²⁶ Sidharta, Myra. ‘Chinese Culture’s Comeback’, *Latitudes* 1 (February 2001), pp. 6-9.

²⁷ Aspulis, ‘Fenomena Sastra Mandarin Lima Tahun Terakhir di Indonesia’, *cybersastra.net*: situs sastra nusantara <http://cybersastra.net/cgi-bin/naskah/viewesai.cgi?category=5&id=1014846775>

²⁸ menegaskan bahwa eksistensi Anda diakui di republik yang sedang urakan ini. (*Mandiri Online*, January 26 2001)

²⁹ *Ibid.*

thousand years ago in mainland China, *wayang Po Tay Hie* is believed to have been brought to Indonesia by Chinese immigrants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The performances, which are usually in Mandarin or Malay, are based on Chinese mythology and legends, but the themes of power, the weak versus the strong and the subversion of truth lend themselves readily to more contemporary interpretations.

Kwee Tek Hoay's classic Chinese-Malay novel *Boenga Roos dari Tjikembang*, first published in 1927 (and a favourite of 'housewives' to quote the critics), has also been revived: it was reprinted by a Yogyakarta publishing house and performed as a stage play at the time of Chinese New Year in Jakarta 2001.

In his recent poem 'Co Kong Tik',³⁰ the Balinese poet Tan Lioe Ie recreates the custom amongst Hokkian Chinese in Bali of building a miniature house to send to relatives who have died:

See the flames and the
billowing smoke
Shut your eyes
Stamp your feet:

(Taabb!

Taabb! Taabb!)

The house
evolves!

A small one
on earth

that grows
bigger in heaven

Let the sweet smell of
incense and the circle of
wine

Intoxicate Tu Ti Kong, god
of the soil

Lihat nyala api dan kepulan
asap

Pejamkan mata

Hentakkan kaki:

(Taabb!

Taabb! Taabb!)

Jadilah

rumah!

Yang kecil

di bumi

dibesarkan

di langit

Harum dupa dan lingkaran
arak

Biarkan Tu Ti Kong mabuk

³⁰ Tan Lioe Ie, *Kita bersaudara* (Denpasar, Sanggar Minum Kopi, 1990).

Soja Kui
Soja Kui
Soja Kui
Greetings to our
descendants

The hand of love passes
across the sky
and time
Which used to weep
now laughs

Dawn is breaking
Over the flickering flames
and the waves
at the edge of the coral

When it's all over
open your eyes
Amazed at the love
respectful of the drops of
blood

Soja Kui
Soja Kui
Soja Kui

A small one on earth
that grows bigger in heaven

Soja Kui
Soja Kui
Soja Kui
Salam takzim anak-cucu

Tangan kasih mengembus
langit
dan waktu
Yang dulu tangis
kini tawa

Fajar menyingsing
Jilatan api dan ombak
di kaki-kaki karang

Bila usai
bukalah mata
Takjub akan kasih
hormat tetesan darah

Soja Kui
Soja Kui
Soja Kui

Yang kecil di bumi
dibesarkan di langit

Masalah Cina

Chinese-Indonesian writers have invoked the *masalah Cina* in recent fiction through gentle, optimistic - some might say idealistic - stories about the possibility of friendship and understanding between Chinese and *pribumi* Indonesians, stories in which Chinese-Indonesians demonstrate a generosity of spirit towards their *pribumi* friends. Many such stories are collected in the 1999 volume *Kumpulan cerpen mini Yin Hua*,³¹ a collection of

³¹ Tjandinegara, Wilson, *Kumpulan Cerpen Mini Yin Hua* (Jakarta, Komunitas Sastra Indonesia, 1999).

fifty 'five minute fiction' pieces previously written or published in Mandarin and translated into Indonesian by Wilson Tjandinegara. Symbolically this is an important work, in that it brings to a non-Mandarin speaking readership a previously inaccessible body of work, and it unequivocally foregrounds the Chinese-ness of the authors (all of them are identified by their Chinese names). Arguably, however, it is what the book represents rather than what it contains that makes it significant. Much of the fiction is overly sentimental and falls into the trap of binarial and stereotypical depictions of both *peranakan* and *pribumi* Indonesians. Ming Fang's 'Surat seorang dokter dari Cianjur Selatan ('Letter from a doctor in Cianjur Selatan')', for example, is a 'true story, *kisah nyata*' about a *peranakan* doctor who 'forgets her Chineseness, *lupa bahwa Ananda ini masih keturunan Tionghoa*' as she works amongst poor *pribumi* in Sunda. 'Acien dan Yati ('Acien and Yati')' and 'Lingkaran merah ('The red circle')' are similar stories, about a Chinese landlord and a Chinese stall-owner respectively, who instead of collecting money owing from their *pribumi* debtors, opt for compassion and pay their medical bills.

It is a theme which has also appeared in television drama. For example, the serial *Cinta terhalang tembok* ('Obstructed love'), which screened on Indonesian television in early 2002, tells the tale of a *pribumi* scholar who marries a Chinese woman, and conveys a strong message of the need for forgiveness and cultural understanding.³²

An interesting trend in literary engagement with the *masalah Cina* is the recent adoption of the theme by *pribumi* writers. The most well-known of these is Pramoedya Ananta Toer who, as well as his highly publicised imprisonment under the New Order regime, had also been jailed by Sukarno in 1959 for writing the historical work *Hoakiau*

di Indonesia (Chinese in Indonesia), as a protest against a regime that in his view perpetuated racial discrimination. Pramoedya refers to his Chinese compatriots as *orang asing yang tidak asing* ('foreigners who aren't foreign'). At the relaunch of the book on 21 October 1998, Pramoedya commented,

It is ironic that the worst outbreak [of violence] of all took place at the end of Suharto's New Order era in May 1998, an era during which Pancasila was learned by rote from elementary school through to university. These teachings have apparently remained as mere lip service and have not penetrated to the heart of the matter.³³

Remy Sylado's 1999 novel about the Chinese in colonial Java, *Ca-bau-kan*,³⁴ foregrounds Chinese ethnicity in ways not documented since the 1950s. Essentially a love story between the *pribumi* prostitute Tinung and the Chinese trader Tan Peng Liang, the search for identity is an important parallel theme, a search which is enacted in tales of mixed marriages, the complex dynamics of colonialism, and loss - of language, of culture, of family and of heritage. The novel certainly cannot be read as a celebration of Chinese culture; Wilson Tjandinegara for one regretted the timing of the publication of a novel depicting high levels of violence and hatred within the Chinese community of colonial Batavia.³⁵ Questions have also been raised about the misuse of Mandarin in the text.³⁶ But as with much of the other work under discussion here, the symbolism of the choice of Chinese identity as a literary theme is highly significant. It is a theme which

³² See Cohen, Margot, 'Exploring a painful past', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 19, 2002.

³³ Toer, Pramoedya Ananta, 'Drawing on history for harmony', *The Jakarta Post*, 4 November 1998.

³⁴ The word *ca-bau-kan*, meaning 'woman' in Hokkien, was appropriated in colonial times to mean the native concubine of a Chinese man.

³⁵ Interview with Wilson Tjandinegara, Jakarta, August 2000.

³⁶ Interview with Tan Lioe Ie, Ubud, Bali, August 2000.

had laid dormant for more than thirty years and the very fact of its revivification is important.

The novel was made into a blockbuster movie in early 2002. The ‘Making of *Cabau-kan*’ website focuses mainly on the work done by the research team in its efforts to reproduce ‘authentic’ costumes, artwork and domestic settings of the era, with little attention to the historical context and circumstances of the novel on which it is based. In some ways this continues to be a defining feature of the post-Suharto resurgence in Chinese consciousness – an emphasis on the decorative. Wilson Tjandinegara’s criticism of the novel is echoed in Myra Sidharta’s criticism of the perpetuation of stereotypes in the film: ‘All the men were so cruel...Even towards the women, whom they claimed to love.’³⁷

In the work of the short story writer Veven Wardhana the *masalah Cina* is often inscribed as an enchantment with Chinese-ness that borders on objectification. The focus of his stories is frequently an enigmatic Chinese-Indonesian woman who inspires the fascination and desire of the male (*pribumi*) protagonist. And yet these stories engage with contemporary socio-political reality in Indonesia in novel and intriguing ways. Although his characters are Indonesian, Wardhana’s stories are almost all set outside Indonesia, providing an element of distance and objectivity with which to interrogate the *masalah Cina*. In his story ‘Panggil aku Pheng Hwa’ (‘Call me Pheng Hwa’), for example, this strategy is used to clearly project Chinese-ness as a *masalah* only in Indonesia; once the Chinese character leaves Indonesia s/he is shrouded in a blissful cloak of anonymity: ‘.I no longer felt like a stranger to myself, a feeling which had

³⁷ Margot Cohen, ‘Exploring a painful past’.

always been present within me...I felt as if I'd been born again.³⁸

To the extent that Chinese-Indonesian ethnicity is invoked in poetry, it is almost always within the context of the *masalah Cina*. Specifically, many poems allude to the possibility of Chinese and *pribumi* Indonesians working together for a mutual goal, that of developing a united and strong Indonesian nation. Wilson Tjandinegara's 1996 poem 'Balada seorang lelaki di Nan Yang' ('Ballad of a man in the Southern Ocean'),³⁹ although written before the *era reformasi*, is an optimistic anthem of sorts for this ideal:

Ever since the fifteenth
century
they have crossed the wild
seas
in their junks
escaping disaster and
catastrophe
fleeing the land of their
ancestors
in search of the land of hope
in the Southern
Ocean

A fishing village in Teluk
Naga
a man making rice wine
buries his true self
as he works beside his loyal
companion
a native girl, modest and
unassuming

Although awkward, like a
chicken that has
hatched a duck

Sejak abad lima belas

dengan perahu Jung

mereka arungi lautan ganas
larikan diri dari bencana dan
malapetaka
tinggalkan negeri leluhur

mencari tanah harapan di
Nan Yang

Perkampungan nelayan di
Teluk Naga
seorang encek pembuat arak
mengubur kesendiriannya
bersama seorang
pendamping setia
gadis pribumi lugu
sederhana

Kikuk seperti ayam dan itik

³⁸ Aku tak lagi merasa asing atas diriku sendiri sebagaimana yang selama ini diam-diam menyelip dan mengendap dalam benak...Aku merasa terlahir kembali.

(Wardhana, Veven Sp., *Panggil aku Pheng Hwa* {Jakarta, Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2002}, p. 8).

³⁹ Tjandinegara, Wilson, *Rumah Panggung di Kampung Halaman* (Jakarta, Komunitas Sastra Indonesia, 1999).

one using chopsticks
the other fond of chilli
speaking in sign language,
their craft sails between
cultures
out of their wanderings a
new generation is
formed

From generation to
generation
their skin tones gradually
blend
forming a generation of
unity:
'Cina Benteng'⁴⁰
a model of assimilation

The Cisadane river bears
witness
to the life's journey of the
two children of the
nation
together opposing the Dutch
colonisers
practising mutual
cooperation
bound in true friendship
just as the Cisadane flows
on
from century to century
towards the homeland -
Indonesia

yang satu pakai sumpit
yang satu doyan sambel
dengan bahasa isyarat
berlayar biduk antar bangsa

beranak pinak dalam
kembara

Dari generasi ke generasi

warna kulit makin menyatu

jadilah generasi persatuan:

'Cina Benteng'
teladan pembauran

Sungai Cisadane jadi saksi

perjalanan hidup kedua anak
bangsa

bersama melawan penjajah
Belanda
bergotong royong

terjalin persaudaraan sejati
seperti Cisadane terus
mengalir
dari abad ke abad
menuju tanah air -
Indonesia

Despite the optimism of this poem, however, there is a very real suggestion that 'it's what we're not that makes us what we are': that is, Chinese-ness is understood by being not *pribumi*. It is this sort of mindset that gave rise to the expressions *pri* (an abbreviation of

⁴⁰ Many Betawi (indigenous Jakartans) are known as 'Hitachi', which stands for 'Hitam tapi Cina' (brown-skinned Chinese), or Cina Benteng, because of their assimilation with the local population. The 'Cina Benteng' phenomenon problematises efforts to identify Sino-Indonesians purely by their physical appearance.

pribumi) and *nonpri* which, despite suggestions by many that they have outlived any usefulness they may have had, are still invoked. (For example, in his 1999 foreword to the anthology *Resonansi Indonesia*, Leo Suryadinata used the terms, though within quotation marks.⁴¹) The very notion of *pribumi*-ness is of course a social construct: in Ariel Heryanto's words, 'a product of the nostalgia of modern man, in particular anthropologists from colonial and industrial Europe, for the pre-modern.'⁴²

Wilson's poem 'Kambing hitam ('Scapegoat')'⁴³ gives voice to a simmering resentment at this persistent process of relativising one ethnic group against another, and the stereotypes to which it has given rise:

Since time immemorial
the majority
in this world
have been the 'scapegoats'

Sejak purbakala
yang paling banyak
di dunia ini
adalah 'kambing hitam'

Although they have black
hair and skin
their blood is still red

Walau kulit dan bulunya
hitam
namun darahnya sama
merah

The ambitious power-
mongers
the politicians, peddlers of
promises
the charlatans
who throw stones, sleight of
hand

Para ambisius pengejar
kekuasaan
politisi pengobral janji
para orang culas
lempar batu sembunyi
tangan

It is they
who turn the scapegoats
into victims

Mereka itulah
menghitamkan kambing
jadikan kurban

⁴¹ *Resonansi Indonesia*, p. 15.

⁴² sebuah objek nostalgia manusia modern pada yang pra-modern, khususnya para ahli antropologi di masa kolonial dan industrial Eropa ('Nonpribumi: Dibiarkan, Dibaurkan, atau Dibubarkan?' p. 190).

⁴³ *Rumah Panggung di Kampung Halaman*

When needed
they are exploited
when a situation becomes
out of control
they are sacrificed

Ketika dibutuhkan
mereka diperalat
ketika tak mampu kuasai
situasi
dijadikan tumbal

No matter what era
no matter what country
the most wretched of all

Zaman apa pun
negara mana pun
yang paling malang
nasibnya

is you:
the scapegoat

adalah kau:
'kambing hitam'

Tragedy of May 1998

As Wilson Tjandinegara puts it,

The tragedy of May 1998 rocked the world. Most of the victims were of Chinese ethnicity. It was a tragedy that has left a dark stain on the history of Indonesia. A poet who has any compassion must condemn those events and convey his sympathy to the victims through his poetry....⁴⁴

The *Tragedi Mei* has become a cornerstone of much writing about Chinese identity since the fall of Suharto. Indeed, the main character of Veven Wardhana's story 'Wo Te Pao-Pe' suggests that Chinese-ness is now defined within the parameters of the *Tragedi Mei*: 'Why does it seem that people have only become aware of the existence of the Chinese because of the upheaval of May?'⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Tragedi bulan Mei, telah menggemparkan dunia. Korbannya kebanyakan dari etnis Tionghoa. Sebuah tragedi yang meninggalkan noda hitam dalam sejarah Indonesia. Sebagai penyair yang punya hati nurani, pasti mengutuk peristiwa tersebut dan menyampaikan simpatinya kepada para korban, dengan caranya seorang penyair (Ibid., p. 28).

⁴⁵ kok kayaknya eksistensi orang-orang Cina baru terasa karena kerusuhan Mei saja (Wardhana, *Panggil aku Pheng Hwa*, p. 14).

Although the terror of the killings and rapes and the atmosphere of fear of 1998 are made explicit in some recent literary production by Chinese-Indonesians, there is an understated quality about them. On the whole these stories are marked by sadness and pathos: rather than defining the narrative, the anger and resentment simmers below the surface. These stories document the terror, rather than overtly resist it.

The 'five minute fiction' 'Kekerabatan lain suku' ('Inter-ethnic friendship') is an idealistic story about an inter-ethnic marriage that is so harmonious and supported so fully by both sides of the family that it survives the economic crisis and even the *badai bulan Mei*, the 'May turmoil'. A. Jiao's story *Peci*⁴⁶ is about the friendship between the *pribumi* Salman and his Chinese friend A. Siong. On a shopping expedition for Salman's son's circumcision celebration, the two find themselves caught up in a riot against Chinese businesses. Salman quickly takes off his *peci* and puts it onto A. Siong's head so he will be taken for a Muslim, hence *pribumi*. The story employs a metonymy that is common to much of the fiction that engages with the *masalah Cina*: *peci* stands for *pribumi*; Chinese name stands for Chinese ethnicity. The reductionist nature of metonymy leads to the essentialism of 'Chinese-ness' and '*pribumi*-ness' and the perpetuation, rather than the deconstruction, of commonly-held stereotypes.

But of course names do have great symbolic significance. Suharto's 1967 decree meant that Chinese citizens in Indonesia were strongly discouraged from using their Chinese names. This led many Chinese to adopt either beautiful melodic Sanskrit names, or clever names,⁴⁷ or combinations of Western and Islamic names.⁴⁸ Others, wishing to retain something of their Chinese name, incorporated elements of it into a new name.

⁴⁶ A *peci* is the black velvet cap worn by Muslim men in Indonesia.

⁴⁷ such as Arief Budiman, literally meaning 'learned wise man'

Those whose name was ‘Han’ for example often chose Javanese names such as ‘Handoko’ or ‘Handoyo’.⁴⁹ Furthermore, as Ariel Heryanto points out, the strategy was used as an effective Othering process by the New Order: badminton world champions of Chinese origin were always known by their Indonesian names but criminals of Chinese descent appeared in the media under their Chinese names.⁵⁰ Interestingly, Myra Sidharta writes that in *reformasi* Indonesia many young Chinese-Indonesians, who were given an Indonesian name at birth, have begun asking their parents for a Chinese name.⁵¹

Nano Riantiarno’s 1998 piece ‘Melati’, written as part of a magazine editorial,⁵² uses naming to demonstrate the effect of the marginalisation of ‘Chinese-ness’ on an individual’s self-identity, in particular during the uncertain and dangerous times immediately following the fall of Suharto. The anecdote suggests a different way of thinking about the question ‘What’s in a name?’ It bears repeating in its entirety:

⁴⁸ such as Bob Hasan

⁴⁹ Liem, *Prasangka terhadap etnis Cina*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ This theme is taken up in a recent television serial called *Ing tak Perlu Menangis* (‘Ing doesn’t need to cry’), in which a champion badminton player (based on the real-life badminton player Ivana Lie) can represent her country at badminton but still not get an Indonesian passport or ID card.

⁵¹ Sidharta, ‘Chinese Culture’s Comeback’, p. 9.

⁵² Cited in Wibowo, ‘Kapan ke-Cina-an akan berhenti?’, p. 7.

There was a little girl called Mawar. She was still in primary school. Not long after the tragedy of May 1998 she came home from school and asked her father: 'Dad, what's my name?' Naturally her father was thrown by this question, and he said nothing for a moment or two. Then he said, 'Your name is Mawar.' But the child was insistent, pestering him to tell her what her real name was. Then he realised what was behind her question. It transpired that the girl's friends had been nagging her to tell them her 'original name' which couldn't possibly be 'Mawar'. Her distinctive complexion and her almond shaped eyes were what had prompted their questioning.

Adalah seorang gadis kecil bernama "Mawar". Ia masih duduk di bangku sekolah SD. Tidak lama sesudah terjadinya *Tragedi Mei* 1998, ia masuk sekolah. Ketika ia pulang sekolah ia bertanya kepada ayahnya: 'Ayah, siapakah nama saya?' Tentu saja sang ayah bingung, diam terhenyak. Ia mengatakan; 'Namamu Mawar.' Tetapi si anak terus mendesak, minta agar diberitahu nama sebenarnya. Kini ia baru tahu apa yang dimaksud dengan pertanyaan itu. Rupanya si gadis kecil itu ditanyai oleh teman-temannya 'nama aslinya', yang bukan 'Mawar.' Kulitnya yang kuning dan matanya yang agak sipit telah membuat teman-temannya bertanya tentang 'nama aslinya.'

Names and what they signify is also a common motif in Veven Wardhana's short stories. His story 'Panggil aku Pheng Hwa' begins:

History had forced me to become a chameleon: I changed my name as I moved from place to place. Sometimes I introduced myself as Pheng Hwa, sometimes I used the name Effendi Wardhana, my name as it is written on my ID card, or as we say, the name the government gave us.⁵³

⁵³ Sejarah telah menyeretku menjadi bunglon, cepat berganti nama begitu berpindah tempat hinggap. Ada saatnya kukenalkan diriku sebagai Pheng Hwa, ada masanya kusebutkan namaku sebagai Effendi Wardhana, sebuah nama sebagaimana tertulis di KTP, atau menurut istilah kami sering disebut sebagai nama pemberian negara.

Wardhana, *Panggil aku Pheng Hwa*, p. 3.

Throughout Wardhana's stories the use or displacement of Chinese names serves as a clever metaphor for the construction of the Chinese-Indonesian citizen by the Indonesian state.

Perhaps the writer who has most forcefully expressed outrage at the brutality of May 1998 is Seno Gumira Ajidarma, who has a large repertoire of stories dealing with sensitive political and social issues, most notably his stories about East Timor. In 1998 his magazine *Jakarta Jakarta* was stormed with protests because it reprinted a *New York Times* story of a raped ethnic Chinese woman called Vivian. The article contained elements which were deemed by a group claiming to be defenders of Islam to discredit Islam and Indonesian Muslims in general. Seno's disgust at the cynical and defensive reaction to the May rapes by Indonesians in general and high-ranking officials, certain prominent groups and public figures in particular prompted him to write the short story 'Clara'. The story's chilling tone is made even more emphatic by the fact that Clara's story is related by the boorish police officer who takes her statement, because she is in such a state of shock that she is unable to speak coherently. The verbal brutality of the policeman's commentary and asides as he constructs his report match the physical brutality of the rape itself: 'I have to know what happened after your panties were removed. If you don't tell me, what am I supposed to put in my report?'⁵⁴ 'Don't be too quick to make an issue of being raped. Rape is the hardest thing to prove. If something

⁵⁴ Saya harus tahu apa yang terjadi setelah celana dalam dicopot, kalau kamu tidak bilang, apa yang harus saya tulis dalam laporan?

(Ajidarma, Seno Gumira, 'Clara atawa wanita yang diperkosa', in *Iblis tidak pernah mati* {Yogyakarta, Galang Press, 1999}, p. 75).

All English excerpts of the story used in this article are from Michael Bodden's translation ('Clara', *Indonesia* 68 {October 1999}, pp.157-163.)

goes wrong you'll be accused of slander.'⁵⁵ 'She was really beautiful and attractive, even though her hair was dyed red. I, too, felt like raping her.'⁵⁶ And the most telling indictment on the process of law in Indonesia: 'I've become an expert in making bitter truths turn magically into something agreeable and, contrariwise, making deeds that were actually patriotic turn into subversion – the main thing is they were always transformed according to the needs of the moment.'⁵⁷ But in this story too the commonly-held stereotypes of Chinese-ness are perpetuated: reference is made to Clara's slant-eyes, she has a million rupiah in her wallet, she drives a BMW.

In May 2001 Seno and the cartoonist Asnar Zacky released a collaborative work titled 'Jakarta 2039' which imagines, in comic-book form, what life might be like forty years hence for those involved in the Tragedy of May 1998. On 14 February 2039, a forty year-old woman who had been born as a result of a rape in May 1998 begins to ask questions about her parents. At the same time an old woman who had become pregnant as a result of being raped in May 1998 starts asking about the whereabouts of the child, who had been taken from her immediately after its birth on 14 February 1999. And the rapist, now an old man on his deathbed, is confessing his sin to his daughter before drawing his final breath. The work attracted considerable controversy, including accusations that the two writers were trivialising an intensely private experience and that

⁵⁵ Jangan terlalu mudah menyebarkan isu diperkosa. Perkosaan itu paling sulit dibuktikan. Salah-salah kamu dianggap menyebarkan fitnah.

(Ibid., p. 78).

⁵⁶ Dia sungguh-sungguh cantik dan menarik, meskipun rambutnya dicat warna merah. Rasanya aku juga ingin memperkosanya.

(Ibid., p. 78).

⁵⁷ Aku sudah menjadi sangat ahli menyulap kenyataan yang pahit menjadi menyenangkan, dan sebaliknya perbuatan yang sebetulnya patriotik menjadi subversif – pokoknya selalu disesuaikan dengan kebutuhan.

(Ibid., p. 70).

the work bordered on objectification of the victims. Others commented upon an uncharacteristic - for Seno - lack of passion in the work.

The response to this work also gave public prominence to a question which previously had been expressed only as hearsay or gossip, namely, 'Did the sexual violence actually happen?'⁵⁸ A number of participants at the launch of Seno's book publicly voiced their scepticism about the veracity of the rape reports. It is a scepticism which Seno satirises in his story 'Clara', through the asides of the police officer: 'I had to be suspicious, always anticipating possibilities, laying traps, fishing out evidence, and driving her to exhaustion so that she'd quickly confess what her real motives were.'⁵⁹

The protagonist of Veven Wardhana's story 'Wo Te Pao-Pe', though appalled at the stories he has heard about the violence, nonetheless confesses to a 'need to convince myself that the mass rapes in fact actually happened.'⁶⁰ In some quarters the scepticism originates in a disbelief that, to quote Rahayu Ratnaningsih, 'such a gross violation of human rights could have ever been carried out by generally mild-mannered, God-fearing Indonesian men'.⁶¹ There is also a suggestion in 'Clara' that the *pribumi* hatred of Chinese runs so deep that it causes those normally mild-mannered men to behave in a way that is completely out of character, and hence that their behaviour is somehow comprehensible and forgivable. The *pribumi* woman who, on the one hand comes

⁵⁸ A total of 168 rape cases was documented by the Volunteer Team for Humanity. Of that number, twenty victims died, either murdered or committing suicide. <http://land.heim.at/podersdorf/220272/main.html>

⁵⁹ aku harus curiga, sibuk menduga kemungkinan, sibuk menjebak, mamancing, dan membuatnya lelah supaya cepat mengaku apa maksudnya sebenarnya (Ajidarma, 'Clara atawa wanita yang diperkosa', p. 74).

⁶⁰ butuh meyakinkan diri bahwa pemerkosaan massal itu benar-benar pernah terjadi (Wardhana, *Panggil aku Pheng Hwa*, p. 15).

⁶¹ Ratnaningsih, Rahayu, 'Still no Closure on May 1998 Atrocities against Ethnic Chinese', <http://members.tripod.com/~LuciferOne/9902/39.htm>

Clara's aid, on the other hand beseeches her, 'Forgive our boys...they really hate the Chinks.'⁶²

Although the events of May 1998 are still fresh in many people's memory, these stories engage with notions of suppressing, forgetting and blurring. In Veven Wardhana's story 'Deja Vu: Kathmandu', for example, the character 'Xiao Qing' (not her real name) wants to erase the memory of Indonesia and what happened to her twin sister in May 1998; and the man she meets in Kathmandu, 'Xu Xian' (not his real name) is not allowed to publish articles about the *Tragedi Mei*. It appears that the re-ordering of history, a well-known phenomenon in Indonesia, has begun.

In the poetry overtly addressing the *Tragedi Mei* the brooding resentment of poems such as Wilson Tjandinegara's 'Scapegoat' erupts into outrage and grief. Wilson's own despair is expressed in the following lines from his poem 'Kita tidak boleh berdiam diri'⁶³ ('We must not remain silent'):

Because we've always been
patient
we've often been the victims
the scapegoats

For that reason we must not
remain silent!

There must be a limit to our
stoicism
in the face of unfair treatment
and humiliation

Because we must not remain

Karena terus bersabar

kita sering jadi korban
jadi kambing hitam

Karenanya, kita tak boleh
berdiam diri

Menerima perlakuan tidak adil
menahan diri terhadap hinaan
orang
ternyata ada batasnya

Karena, kita tak boleh

⁶² Maafkan anak-anak kami...mereka memang benci dengan Cina (Ajidarma, 'Clara atawa wanita yang diperkosa', p. 76).

⁶³ Wilson Tjandinegara, *Rumah Panggung di Kampung Halaman*.

silent!

We are humans too, we are
humans!
with the same rights
how is it that we are
constantly oppressed

For that reason we must not
remain silent!

berdiam diri!

Kita juga manusia, adalah
manusia!
punya hak yang sama
betapa mungkin diinjak-injak

Karenanya, kita tak boleh
berdiam diri!

Recent poetry by Ming Fang and Jeanne Yap also evokes the horror of those days in May 1998, and in their choice of language and their setting in the bloody streets of Jakarta, they are reminiscent of the poems written by Taufiq Ismail in early February 1966 when massive student demonstrations in Jakarta demanded urgent social reform, a cause to which many students martyred themselves. In ‘Darah, bersimbah di atas dada pahlawan’⁶⁴ (‘Blood, splattered on the chests of the heroes’) Ming Fang writes of *the body of a young man/splattered with blood*⁶⁵ and *the students fighting for the rights of the people*.⁶⁶ However, Ming Fang brings the poem back to the *masalah Cina* in the final two lines: ‘*They come from the same root/Why do they oppress each other?*’⁶⁷ The ‘sympathy to the victims’ that Wilson Tjandinegara demands from compassionate poets is evident also in Jeanne Yap’s poem ‘Darah di langit darah di bumi menyatu di bulan Mei’ (‘Blood in the sky blood on earth flow as one in May’), a time she describes as *the cruellest winter*⁶⁸ and *the most terrifying nightmare of my life*.⁶⁹ In her poem the victims

⁶⁴ *Janji Berjumpa di Kota Pegunungan*, translated by Wilson Tjandinegara (Jakarta, Komunitas Sastra Indonesia, 2001).

⁶⁵ tubuh seorang pemuda/bersimbah darah

⁶⁶ mahasiswa yang memperjuangkan hak rakyat

⁶⁷ ‘Asalnya dari akar yang sama/Mengapa saling menganiaya?’

⁶⁸ musim dingin paling kejam

⁶⁹ mimpi buruk paling mengerikan dalam kehidupan

of the *Tragedi Mei*, like war heroes, are dying for the sake of their grandchildren's future:
*You/sacrifice your blood/so that in return/your grandchildren will have peace.*⁷⁰

Perhaps the most haunting of the poems written about May 1998 is Medy Loekito's '14 mei 1998' (14th May 1998):⁷¹

the night	malam tak lagi hening
has lost its	
clarity	
i reach for	kugapai tangan Tuhan
God's hand	
it isn't	tiada
there	

It bespeaks a loss perhaps more profound than the loss of human life.

Conclusion

Since the early twentieth century in Indonesia literature has been a site for the construction and negotiation of cultural meaning. Alongside committed *pribumi* nationalists writing in the new Indonesian language, early *peranakan* writers, as well as adapting and translating works into so-called 'Sino-Malay', also produced new stories that were informed by Chinese nationalist sentiments and engaged with notions of what it meant to be a *peranakan* in the colonial East Indies. As such, early writing by Chinese-Indonesians can be understood as part of the wider project of literary activity in Indonesia, in which socially-engaged writers grappled with what it meant to be 'Indonesian'.

⁷⁰ Kalian/berkorban darah/semoga terbalas/ketenangan bagi anak cucu

⁷¹ *Mitra*, March 2000.

Given the effacing of Chinese culture in New Order Indonesia, and the resultant invisibility of Chinese-Indonesian writers, the relative freedoms delivered with the fall of the Suharto regime led to heightened anticipation that Chinese-Indonesian writers might announce their presence in *reformasi* Indonesia through a renewed engagement with issues of identity and ethnicity.

However, as Ariel Heryanto points out, Chinese-ness was not only assaulted by the New Order, but was also in part constructed by it. Like other New Order ‘definitions’ - such as ‘Old Order’ (*Orla*), and ‘30th September Movement’ (*G-30-3/PKI*) - the *pribumi/nonpribumi* categorisation was needed to reinvent and perpetuate a mindset in which the New Order could establish an authoritarian regime based on political stability and economic growth.⁷² As such, rehabilitation of Chinese-ness is not enough; there is a need to deconstruct the whole notion of ‘Sino-Indonesian identity’.

This rehabilitation is a project yet to be attempted by contemporary poets and writers of fiction in Indonesia. While the discussion above demonstrates concern and engagement with the two ‘big themes’ – *masalah Cina* and *Tragedi Mei 1998* – there is little analysis of what it might mean to be Chinese in contemporary Indonesia. Ariel Heryanto has written compellingly of how ‘Chinese-ness’ continues, in post-Suharto Indonesia, to be taken as something ‘fixed and given’.⁷³ In much recent literature by and about Chinese-Indonesians, even in the more sophisticated work of Veven Wardhana and Seno Gumira Ajidarma, the use of metonymy and traditional stereotypes and the continuing practice of relativising serves to perpetuate, rather than challenge, that ‘fixedness’.

⁷² ‘Nonpribumi: Dibiarkan, Dibaurkan, atau Dibubarkan?’, p. 191.

⁷³ ‘Remembering and dismembering Indonesia’, *Latitudes* 1 (February 2001), pp. 10-15.

