Golddiggers, Farmers, and Traders in the “Chinese Districts” of West Kalimantan, Indonesia, Mary Somers Heidhues
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ont contribué à composer l’image de Bali, mais encore les nationalistes javanais, les réformateurs musulmans et les missionnaires chrétiens, sans oublier les administrateurs néerlandais, qui ont travaillé à façonner la société balinaise conformément à leurs visées, une tâche poursuivie de nos jours par leurs émules indonésiens.

Dans ces conditions, la question n’est plus de se demander si la culture balinaise a pu survivre intacte, sans être corrompue par la civilisation occidentale moderne, mais bien de comprendre comment les Balinais se sont approprié la vision touristique de leur culture pour construire leur propre identité culturelle. Ce faisant, la culture qu’ils ont mise en scène pour le bénéfice des touristes est devenue aux yeux des Balinais eux-mêmes leur culture traditionnelle. Si Yamashita fait montre d’une utilisation judicieuse de la littérature anthropologique sur le tourisme pour appuyer et conceptualiser son propos, en revanche la pertinence de ses conclusions est sérieusement entachée par sa méconnaissance de la société balinaise et de ses complexités. En témoignent notamment, outre le caractère extrêmement superficiel de ses descriptions ethnographiques, les nombreuses erreurs factuelles qui émaillent son étude ainsi que l’orthographe trop souvent fantaisiste des termes vernaculaires. De sorte que, pour un lecteur un tant soit peu informé des réalités balinaises, cet ouvrage n’est malheureusement pas à la hauteur des ambitions théoriques affichées par son auteur.

Note


By Jamie S. Davidson*

In her third major work of this genre, historian Mary Somers Heidhues aims to shed light on an important minority concentration in Indonesia, this time, the long-standing Chinese communities of West Borneo/Kalimantan. This is a critical, for as Heidhues notes in her introduction, little is known about this significant minority and whatever historical records available are “fast disappearing” (p. 11). Heidhues deftly traces the innumerable social, economic, cultural, and political travails and triumphs that these communities have experienced and overcome. They range from the first migratory waves in the 18th century, the great Dutch-kongsi wars, the shifting of economic bases from mining to subsistence and small-scale agriculture, through to the depression and the horrific violence perpetrated against these communities both by Japanese and New Order armies.

Concentrated in the province’s western lowlands, these communities historically have had greater material links with Singapore than Batavia/Jakarta, and ideological affinities more attuned to China than Indonesia. To reconstruct these trying histories, Heidhues draws upon an impressive array of colonial documents, archives – state and personal alike – and other written sources in Dutch and Indonesian. This is clearly one of the book’s strengths and delights. Meanwhile, Heidhues rather honestly and admirably confronts the lack of Chinese-language sources – oral and written – and why other approaches like ethnohistory were not deployed in this endeavor (pp. 13-14). At the outset, Heidhues convincingly evinces the uniqueness of these communities within the context of a regional-minority history. First is their relative poor economic standing vis-à-vis their better-off and better-researched counterparts on Java. With this history, Heidhues lifts the stereotyped images of the Indonesain of Chinese descent as economic pariah. Second is the difficulty in applying the well-traveled label “sojourners” to these groups, unlike elsewhere in the archipelago. In West Borneo/Kalimantan, their permanent and substantially large presence dates from the mid-18th century, and in fact owes little to European colonial policies, again vis-à-vis many other diasporic Chinese communities across Southeast Asia. Finally and ably evidenced by Heidhues is the delicate socio-cultural balance these communities developed over time. On the one hand, evolving in a gold-mining environment of relative independence from colonial or Malay sultanate influence, they retained a sense of Chinese-ness to degrees greater than counterparts on Java. The predominant use of Chinese languages, especially that of the Hakka speech group, is a notable example. On the other
hand, as Heidhues rightly notes, these communities did not simply establish a “little China.” Instead, they migrated, struggled, flourished, grieved, and re-built societies in the tropics, or more to the point, “in the Indonesian tropics” (p. 13). The wonderful assortment of rare photos accompanying the text helps to further ground them in their Indonesian surroundings.

The book’s first three chapters offer a skilled and colorful historical picture of these communities and the region’s peoples broadly. Chapter One lays the necessary ethnological foundation upon which the following chapters build. In this effort, Heidhues, better than prior studies have done, underscores the inter-community/inter-ethnic contexts in which these Chinese were embedded. With regard to the main ethnic groups of the region – Malays, Dayak, and Chinese – Heidhues gingerly situates herself between constructivist notions of ethnicity, highlighted by the influence of colonial stratification, categorization, and reification, and the deeper historically-informed, essentialist notions of difference within, between, and among these entities. Throughout the work, she interrogates the complex and meaningful internal variations within each ethnicity. She pinpoints the region’s longtime, evident economic segmentation according to ethnicity as the primary factor that has over time given notions of ethnic difference their substance.

Chapters 2 and 3 cover the growth of the gold-mining partnerships (kongsi), the harsh environments in which they thrived and suffered, the independence gained from coastal Malay Sultanates, and finally, Dutch attempts to control and eventually suppress these “little republics.” Heidhues concedes that this history is largely known. Still, she brings new and interesting interpretations to the topic. For one, whereas others have emphasized the political and economic aspects of the kongsi, Heidhues underscores their religious functions. Nearly each one had its own patron god or goddess. With regard to the Dutch-kongsi wars, she admirably brings to light the colonial policies that led to the battles, although finer detail of these events can be found elsewhere.1

Rather, the book’s most significant contribution lies in the next three chapters, its heart. Going beyond the established path of the Dutch-kongsi wars, Heidhues examines their aftermath on the miners and the ways in which these sought to reconstitute their societies, although in distinctly different forms. These histories are far less known and, thus, that much more critical. Here, several key themes nicely emerge. First, with the decline of the mining economy, the development of a modern regional economy fell to the tens of thousands of small-scale Chinese farmers and traders, enterprises largely devoid of European capital. “Foreign” capital was not wholly absent in the region, however. Trade links with Singaporean capitalists afforded West Borneo/Kalimantan’s economy the necessary capital in which to grow. Second is the fact that, despite stories to the contrary, the Dutch never prospered from this colonial outpost. The region acted as a drain on the colonial state’s coffers. Then, there is the historical importance of migratory patterns. Although, over time, this regional Chinese population expanded, it did neither incrementally nor linearly. Economic hardships resulted in significant out-migration, while conversely, boom times attracted hordes of immigrants to this vast and sparsely populated region. Finally, Heidhues sheds light on the harsh ironies that these communities endured. Ideologically attuned to developments in China, including an acrimonious communist-nationalist split, the Chinese were often adversely affected by political happenings in Indonesia. One illustrative example is the slaughter of some 2000 Chinese civilians – known as the Pontianak Affair – by the Japanese army during their WW II occupation of the region.

No matter how dire this tragedy was, it would not be the last one to befall these ethnic Chinese. The arrival of the highly Sino-phobic New Order state apparatus in the mid-to-late 1960s, subject of the last chapter, “Community Under Duress,” provides the proper context in which to situate this subsequent atrocity. Here, Heidhues wades back into a subject that is better known, and in this way, brings the work full circle. This chapter recounts the New Order army-backed “Dayak demonstrations” that buffeted the inland Chinese communities beginning in late 1967. In this case, following their facilitation of communist-related massacres on Java and Bali, Suharto’s army sought to move these groups to more manageable coastal, urban locales to disrupt supply lines that they believed were giving sustenance to communist insurgents, remnants of Indonesia’s Confrontation