

China and the Shaping of Indonesia, 1949–1965

HONG LIU

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This is a long-awaited book on the interaction that took place between Indonesia and China in 1949–65. Based on his dissertation submitted to Ohio University, this book by Liu Hong, the leading academic in this field, maps out the perceptions of the People’s Republic of China among the major Indonesian leaders and intellectuals of the period. This was a tumultuous period when the two newly independent Asian giants struggled to undertake nation-building and search for the best modes of government following a period of independence and civil wars.

Works on the Cold War historiography of diplomatic historians have observed how relations obtained between Beijing and Jakarta. The communist ties between China and Indonesia were a research topic in the field, supported by the opening of English/American archives. Jakarta needed China for their fight in West Papua and against Malaysia (Konfrontasi). Conversely, Beijing also needed Indonesia for their fight against Taiwan and strategy vis-à-vis Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and United States of America. The two newly independent states shared a wide range of common diplomatic goals at this time, but these were destroyed by the changes that followed the 30 September Movement (G30S) in Indonesia in 1965. With the establishment of an anti-communist regime in Indonesia and the Cultural Revolution gaining momentum in China, the two countries severed diplomatic ties in 1967 and it was not until 1990 that they resumed their relationship.

Taking this diplomatic historiography into account, Liu suggests an alternative frame of analysis in understanding the period between 1949 and 1965. He suggests that we should treat “China as something more than a communist state and an ethnic Chinese homeland and placing its changing and multifaceted constructions in postcolonial Southeast Asia,” and “go beyond the conventional approach framed by the primacy of the nation state, diplomacy, ethnicity and the East-West binary” (p. 11).

In so doing, he questions what China meant for those Indonesians at the time. Through his nuanced analysis of writings and speeches of Indonesian leaders and intellectuals, he argues that “China served as an important and viable alternative to western dominant notions of the modernity project in Indonesia” (p. 271). And this modernity, he argues, derived from Indonesian’s self-image and its frustration over the political turmoil in Indonesia. China thus presented an ideal image of what Indonesia wanted to achieve or should have accomplished. The author proposes a “China Metaphor” to articulate this point. “[T]he China metaphor reflected not only Indonesians’ disillusionment about what had gone wrong at home but, more importantly, their aspirations for what could have been achieved” (p. 270).

The main figures among the broad selection of leaders and intellectuals who are highlighted in this book are Soekarno (Chapter 7) and Pramodya Ananta Toer (Chapter 8). For Soekarno,

China was the place where he found his ideal form of governance, a form of “Guided Democracy.” He was convinced by his visit to China in 1957 that social harmony and national integration could be accomplished without a democracy. For the writer Pramoedya, a visit to China in 1957 and correspondence with Chen Xiaru enabled him to assume his role as a political activist. In China, he was shocked to see the high status of professional writers and its active participation in politics. This led him to join Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (LEKRA), an organization of artists and writers initiated by Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) leaders and mandated to create artistic forms of socialist realism, a fact that was instrumental in shaping the themes in his writings such as *Hoakiau di Indonesia* [The Overseas Chinese in Indonesia].

While the story of the above two figures are inarguably the most enjoyable chapters (7 and 8), I would like to stress another academic contribution of the book, namely, the author’s findings on Mohammad Hatta and Sukiman Wirjosandjojo. While Soekarno and Pramoedya perfectly fit the mold of Indonesians who saw “modernity” in China, vice-President Hatta and the sixth Prime Minister Sukiman, the leader of the political party Masyumi (Council of Indonesian Muslim Associations), represented different perspectives. The two were seen as hard-core anti-communist or anti-China (or both) figures at the time.

The author introduces an episode concerning Hatta on his visit to China in 1957. In the meeting, he questioned Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai not only on the paths of economic development, but also on “how to nurture good discipline among the Chinese people who had been undisciplined in the past (“some people in Indonesia are crazy for independence just for the sake of being independent, thus having poor efficiency” remarked Hatta)” (p.91). This confirms and enriches Hatta’s view of China as cited in the US archives, in which Hatta observed that “Russians were first Communists and secondly Russians, Chinese were first Chinese and secondly Communists.”¹⁾

Another surprising figure, Sukiman who became the Prime Minister of Indonesia and was responsible for the notorious raid against the Chinese embassy in August 1951, was quoted as saying: “I sincerely hope that trade unions in our country should not stage strikes so frequently at will. You see, are there any strikes in the new China? All the people there are busy building their nation; we should learn from the new China’s example” (p. 86).

The above remarks by the two figures who had hitherto been overlooked in studies that sought to understand the relationship between Indonesia and China perfectly strengthen the arguments of the book. “The core narrative of Indonesian intellectuals” was not just to differentiate China from Communists or from an overseas Chinese’ homeland, but rather a way to seek an ideal mode of politics.

While the book offers a rich account of how Indonesians saw China and how their vision affected their careers, a slight difficulty may arise in comprehending the key terminology of the

1) The comments are dated August 1957. Department of State, Central Files, 756D.00/8-3057. Secret.

book, the “China Metaphor.” What is most fascinating about the author’s work is that he has presented a wide range of perspectives on the way each person utilized China for his respective political agenda rather than subsume everything under a single/core idea about China as a metaphor of Modernity. Liu’s work broadens our horizon for understanding China from the viewpoint of Indonesia, yet at the same time, he limits its horizon through the use of the China Metaphor to understand the idea of “Modernity.”

Some readers who are familiar with the history in the book might be surprised at the absence of people like the Partai Komunis Indonesia leader DN Aidit, or the prominent ethnic Chinese journalist Liem Koen Hian. They are mentioned only in passing. Also missing are the military leaders. Moreover, the story abruptly ends on the eve of G30S, and leaves readers with the question of whether the idea of China as a source of Modernity rather than a communist icon was able to survive the anti-communist purge in Indonesia.

If these Communist leaders, ethnic Chinese intellectuals, and military leaders had been incorporated into the analysis, the argument of the China Metaphor could have been a more powerful one. It is not difficult to say that for all parties, China remained a central topic of discussion during the period concerned. If the above voices had been incorporated to the degree in which the analysis equally focuses on Sukarno and Aidit, it may well be possible to argue that China was much more a metaphor for all sides in Indonesia’s political landscape of the period.

In this way, a continuum can be seen to exist in the idea of the China Metaphor from the Suharto period up until the present. China was not only a powerful metaphor to legitimize military action in the early Suharto period, but also a metaphor and a model for efficient economic development led by the industrial sector from the 1990s to the present.

Having said that, I must say the choices that the author has made must have been a tough one: to broaden the scope of a metaphor or to focus on a critical aspect of history which no one has documented. There are good reasons behind Liu’s decision to limit the scope of the metaphor, since we can refer to other books to understand the other dimensions of Indonesia-China relationship.

This is a book by one of the first-generation Southeast Asianists from China in the post-Cultural Revolution era. It has its unique strengths compared to the work of Chinese Southeast Asianists from the pre-Cultural Revolution Period who tended to limit themselves to the study of overseas Chinese. Liu offers a perspective that is different from those who study Southeast Asia but originate from other areas of the world. Without an exceptional historian like him, who commands both Chinese and Indonesian and writes eloquently in English, it would not have been possible to illuminate this important part of history and derive lessons from it. This is a wonderful book that opens a window into a fascinating period.

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