

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

<Book Review>

Agus Suwignyo

Gerry van Klinken and Ward Berenschot, eds. *In Search of Middle Indonesia: Middle Classes in Provincial Towns*. Leiden: KITLV Press; Boston: Brill, 2014, xvi+242p.

Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 2015, pp. 209-213.

How to Cite: Suwignyo, Agus. Review of *In Search of Middle Indonesia: Middle Classes in Provincial Towns* edited by Gerry van Klinken and Ward Berenschot. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 2015, pp. 209-213.

Link to this article:

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/2015/04/vol-4-no-1-book-reviews-agus-suwignyo/>

View the table of contents for this issue:

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/2015/04/vol-4-1-of-southeast-asian-studies>

Subscriptions: <http://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

For permissions, please send an e-mail to: english-editorial@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



research in this area. Scholars will find the book to be a valuable resource, as well as an excellent text for undergraduate courses. So, too, will general readers, particularly those interested in the complex lives of money in other cultural contexts.

Ken MacLean

Department of International Development and Social Change, Clark University

References

- Ledeneva, Alena. 2008. Blat and Guanxi: Informal Practices in Russia and China. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50(1): 118–144.
- Mandel, Ruth; and Humphrey, Caroline. 2002. *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Post-Socialism*. Oxford: Berg.
- Maurer, Bill. 2006. The Anthropology of Money. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35: 5–36.
- Ngai, Pun. 2003. Subsumption or Consumption: The Phantom of Consumer Revolution in “Globalizing” China. *Cultural Anthropology* 18(4): 469–492.
- Rofel, Lisa. 2012. The Traffic in Money Boys. *Positions* 18(2): 425–458.

In Search of Middle Indonesia: Middle Classes in Provincial Towns

GERRY VAN KLINKEN and WARD BERENSCHOT, eds.

Leiden: KITLV Press; Boston: Brill, 2014, xvi+242p.

In 2012, the Indonesian *Daily Kompas* conducted a survey aiming to calculate the actual number and define the characteristics of what it called “the middle class cohort” of the country’s population. Involving 2,550 people above 17 years of age who lived in the cities of Jakarta, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, Makassar, and Medan, the survey employed the World Bank criteria of education level, occupation, and purchasing power parity (PPP) to determine the class categories of the respondents. The survey result shows that 1% of the respondents belonged to the upper class, 3.6% to upper middle class, 50.2% to middle class, 39.6% to lower middle class, and 5.6% to the lower class. In the World Bank criteria this means that the surveyed cohort groups, successively, earned and lived on more than US\$20 per day, between US\$10 and 20, between US\$4 and 10, between US\$2 and 4, and less than US\$2. This result echoes the World Bank’s own survey earlier that year as quoted by the *Daily Kompas*, in which 56.5% of the entire Indonesian population of 237 million in 2012—thus forming an actual number of 134 million people—is seen as belonging to the middle class category. *Kompas* and the World Bank surveys represent analyses of the socio-economic diversification of the Indonesian population over the past five years, which generally depicted a growing middle class. Whereas the criteria used for the grouping of the surveyed respondents perform an established standard of income and expenditure method typical of economists, they do

not satisfy other scholars who work on the social, anthropological, and political aspects of demographic population. This edited volume, *In Search of Middle Indonesia*, is an attempt to break these established criteria and definition of “middle class” and to offer an alternative to studying this paradigmatic term and phenomenon.

In Search of Middle Indonesia explores the expanding middle class in Indonesia not by measuring people’s consumption but by raising “more relational, political questions” (p.2). Its basic premise is that “class is not essentially a question of income or expenditure categories; it is a political concept, intended to explain why differences remain between the behavior of rich and poor people over matters of common goods” (p.2). The authors in this book agree on the statement that “the possession of consumer durables says nothing about new political commitments” and that “simply reducing the income threshold to the poverty limit and calling everyone above that ‘middle class’ begs many analytical questions about political action” (p.3). While it does not abandon the income and expenditure methodology, this book employs an ethnological approach to find answers to its prime question “Why is Middle Indonesia so influential, locally and in Indonesia as a whole, though it is neither particularly rich nor particularly central in geographic terms?” (p.8). This book thus examines “middle class” in terms of agencies and their characteristics of behaviors and seeks to clarify the motives that prompt such behaviors by exploring ethnological rather than statistic data.

In Search of Middle Indonesia is organized around three theoretical concepts, namely class, the State, and everyday culture, each of which consists of three individual studies. Three of the chapters concerning Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara emphasize previous studies some of the authors have done on this provincial town (see authors’ biographies pp. vii–ix). Other studies focus on what the authors consider “middle towns,” mostly provincial capitals. It has to be noted that the selection of the geographical locality of these studies reflects the authors’ shared consciousness of two points: the importance of a non-Java centric approach and the centrality of non-metropolitan urban lives in the making of Indonesia’s middle class.

In the first part of the book, about class, Ben White overviews the concept of Middle Indonesia based on Clifford Geertz’s “intermediate town” (1963) and Robert and Helen Lynd’s “Middle-town” (1929; 1937). For this he presents a reflection on the theoretical implications that these concepts bring about in any understanding of the changes of the Indonesian people, society, and State today. Next, Nicolaas Warouw examines class relations among manufacturer workers in the towns of Cilegon and Pekalongan while suggesting the re-positioning of “citizens back in the ‘social contract’ with the state” (p.67). Jan Newberry examines the structure of mobility in a kampong located in a suburb of Yogyakarta in order to understand “the middle class from below” (p.71).

The second part of the book, on the State, presents Sylvia Tidey’s observation on the social segmentation and competition for resources in the town of Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara. Tidey argues that in today’s Kupang, ethnicity is a major factor that explains why social segmentation

and competition for resources have increased and how they are constructed in daily life. Wenty Marina Minza, also in the second part, discusses the work aspirations of youth in the town of Pontianak, West Kalimantan. Like Tidey, Minza points out the important role ethnicity plays, in her case, in the youth's orientation for jobs. She elaborates the fact that non-ethnic Chinese youth in Pontianak mostly desire the status of government employee (Pegawai Negeri Sipil, PNS). Meanwhile, Amalinda Savirani evaluates the post-Soeharto economic reforms and their impact on the "way the construction sector operates" in the town of Pekalongan in the north coast of Central Java. Savirani shows how strong ties between local politicians and contractors had not disappeared in post-Soeharto Pekalongan although the latter had lost considerable power over the system of contract distribution (p. 134).

Part three begins with Cornelis Lay's autobiographic reflection on his hometown now and then, Kupang. Lay witnesses the changes that have taken place in Kupang as he grew up and feels he has become "part of the complex yet paradoxically simple matrix of events taking place in that space" (p. 169). Then, there is Noorhaidi Hasan who discusses the changing role of Islam in the Central Java's Kebumen and South Kalimantan's Martapura. Hasan puts forward the thesis that the rise of the global resurgence concerning Islam that has followed the 9/11 events in the US has stimulated the growing consciousness of Islamic religious identity, social status, and life style among the Indonesian middle class in the two towns. The last chapter of this volume is Joseph Errington's analysis of linguistic dynamics, again, in Kupang that he claims to have reflected "the broader process of geo-social integration and class formation in Indonesia at large" (p. 219).

Generally speaking, this book attempts to offer an alternative to the commonly accepted concept of "middle class" on three points. Firstly, even with income and expenditure criteria, the number of the middle class in Indonesia today has multiplied so drastically that it exceeds any existing assumption scholars have traditionally argued. The common assumption is that the Indonesian middle class has fallen to a relatively small number and comprises a very tiny elite percentage of the population. For example, in his seminal work *The Emergence of the Modern Indonesian Elite* (1960, republished 1984), Robert van Niel says that in 1900, out of a population of 27 million inhabitants in Java and Madura, 2% comprised the middle class. This then went up to about 7% of an Indonesian population of 60 million people in 1942 (*ibid.*). Meanwhile, although "scholars and politicians alike routinely said the middle class made up around 10% of the population," in 1985 economic historian Howard Dick, as cited in the book being reviewed here, claims a middle class figure of 16.6% out of the total Indonesian population (p. 3). All these claims are however, being refuted. As this book argues, in Indonesia today "many more people than [previously assumed] have become consumers" and "recognizably [their] political behavior has changed." Although this book does not provide numbers of its own as to suggest what it presumes to be the new estimated figure of the Indonesian middle class today, the results of both the *Kompas* and the World Bank surveys cited earlier do confirm the premise of an expanding Indonesian middle class that this

book attempts to examine.

Secondly, unlike many other studies, which traditionally identify the middle-class phenomenon of metropolitan cities, this book deliberately selects Indonesian provincial towns as geographical localities in which the middle class question is paradigmatically situated. The logic underlining the selection is both political and theoretical. The authors of this book believe that after 1998 “the strong push for decentralization amidst the democratization that followed did not come from the national elite, but from a much broader provincial classes” (p. 2). There emerged a push for spatial dimension in politics. One of the sources for this push was “not the globalized metropolis, but the provincial towns—a place that foreign researchers rarely visit” (p. 6). In the context of provincial towns, the self-employed medium scale entrepreneurs, the private and public sector clerks, the teachers and the youths, although sharing global consumerist aspirations, were only “partly assimilated with the national bourgeoisie” (p. 6), and had a less secure income than their metropolis counterparts. Yet, this intermediary group holds control over their towns that becomes a power blow to the grip of the national politics given the local autonomy and decentralization.

Thirdly, the book offers a “non-quantitative” definition of the taken-for-granted concept of “middle class” and a way of studying it. The authors of this book understand provincial towns as an intermediary between the highly dynamic, global looking urban life and the relatively quiet life in rural localities. Although the physical space studied in this book covers geographical spaces of provincial towns, Middle Indonesia is referred to more as a paradigm than as an operational framework. “The middle class” of the Middle Indonesia cohort is thus meant as an imaginary locality which, while bridging the political and economic gaps between metropolis and periphery, drives the course of power relationships between the two. This theoretical framework constitutes one of the fresh, or refreshing insights that the book offers to understand Indonesia’s present day middle class.

Although the Introduction of this book conveys a theoretical framework that binds tightly the chapters as an entirety, the three themes that it attempts to use in the organization, i.e. class, the State, and everyday culture, seem to be loosely presented. Readers might wonder how the ethnographic details of the individual chapters are related to each other to frame the paradigmatic inter-relation of the class, the State, and the everyday culture upon which they are categorized. For the latter to be present, it seems that the book requires a concluding chapter, which is absent. This being said, given its title *“In Search” of Middle Indonesia*, this book is missing, to a large extent, the historical perspective that might be useful for situating the ethnographic data either in its entirety or in the individual chapters.

Last but not least, reading this book in the context of the post-parliamentary and presidential election of 2014, it is worth noting one more point. The local government election bill recently passed by the Indonesian Parliament (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR) has cancelled the popular direct vote system of the election of local governments (governors, mayors, and regents) that has

been effective since 1999 and brings it back to the representative vote system by Local Parliaments (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah, DPRD) like in the New Order. Whether the re-centralized, albeit local, election system will influence the dynamics and political commitment of the middle class in provincial towns is yet to be seen. It is not the task of this book to answer this. Yet, by emphasizing the role of politics in the construction of the middle class in provincial towns, this book sounds to me a bit too optimistic about the future of decentralization and democracy in Indonesia. It is very likely that the new bill, unless it is revoked before the local election rounds starting in 2015, will soon lead to a return of oligarchy in which elite-dominated political parties will put to an end the dynamic and energetic courses of life the middle class has lived in provincial towns over the past 10 years.

Agus Suwignyo

Department of History, Gadjah Mada University

References

- Bambang Setiawan. Siapa Kelas Menengah Indonesia? [Who is the Indonesian middle class?]. <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2012/06/08/13003111/Siapa.Kelas.Menengah.Indonesia>, accessed on October 5, 2014.
- . Kelas Menengah Indonesia Konsumtif dan Intoleran [The middle class: Consumptive and intolerant]. <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2012/06/08/11204529/Kelas.Menengah.Konsumtif.dan.Intoleran>, accessed on October 5, 2014.
- Niel, Robert van. 1960. *The Emergence of the Modern Indonesian Elite*. The Hague: W. van Hoeve. Re-published: 1984, Dordrecht and Cinnaminson: Foris Publications.

Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World

E. K. TAN

Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2013, xii+260p.

In Southeast Asian studies, a gap often exists between social science and humanities scholarship. This divide has arisen due to differing research methodologies, methods, approaches, materials, issues, and perspectives. In this sense, E. K. Tan's *Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World* deftly bridges the divide as it copes with an issue, Chineseness, which is a common interest of scholars in both spheres. The underlying critical concept of "Sinophone" has widened the research horizons of literature and Chinese studies, and also been increasingly accepted in fields like comparative literary studies, Southeast Asian studies, cultural studies, diaspora studies, anthropology, and sociology. By focusing on two writers from