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<Book Review>

Tania Murray Li

Sophie Chao. *In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human-Becomings in West Papua*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

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1987 essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation.” Thanks to Fukuoka Madoka and her collaborators, the many Ramayanas of Southeast Asia have now been made more accessible not just to scholars and specialists but also to a general audience of all readers who want to learn more about one of the world’s greatest epic traditions.

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In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human-Becomings in West Papua

SOPHIE CHAO

Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

Nausea. Anger. Grief. With these three words, Sophie Chao introduces the reader to the feelings that overwhelm her whenever she drives through the vast, monotonous fields of monocrop oil palm that blanket Marind lands in West Papua. Two years after I first read Chao’s book, I am still viscerally affected by her powerful portrayals of Marind communities and the devastation to which they have been subjected. They make me shudder.

Nausea. Chao’s poetic and poignant style of writing enables the reader to feel revulsion at the destruction of Marind lifeworlds, which comprise human and more-than-human kin, most especially the generous, nurturing sago palm. Marind people are also nauseous: they retch with the fumes of agricultural chemicals and choking smoke from corporate forest clearing. They recoiled when Chao offered to show them drone footage of the surrounding plantations: the sight of tens of thousands of hectares of decimated forest was too distressing. *Anger.* Chao explores the corporate greed and the false promises of development and jobs that government officials roll out to justify the ruin that plantations cause. Marind people are angry, but they must be careful about expressing anger in a context of repression and retribution. *Grief.* Chao clarifies that what has been lost is gone forever. Marind people know there is no way to reconstitute their multispecies lifeworlds or the memories, stories, and dreams that anchored them to particular landscapes and events. They survive, but they are not healthy: shorn of access to sago palms and the plants and animals that sustained them, they eat white rice and instant noodles, if they can afford them. Cassowaries that belong in the forest wander into hamlets confused and lost, unsure where they are supposed to be. Dreams are nightmares that bring no rest. Skin dries up and loses its shine. Rivers cease to flow. Everything is out of kilter.

Together with Pujo Semedi, I have studied West Kalimantan’s oil palm plantation zone and the particular form of domination to which customary communities are subjected when their land is occupied by corporations (Li and Semedi 2021). The violence we witnessed in West Kalimantan

was mainly “infrastructural”: once community forests and farms have been flattened by bulldozers and a plantation is installed, the violence is built into the landscape and there is little further need for guns and guards. Yet in West Papua, as Chao explains, arrests, beatings, and mysterious disappearances are ongoing; the military and police are directly and continuously involved in surveillance and patrols; plantation roads are guarded by men with guns; and activists and researchers are exposed to attack. For Marind people, crossing a plantation to get to remnant patches of sago forest is a dangerous venture. Everything is company property. Like the lost cassowary, Marind people struggle to figure out where they are supposed to be in a hostile landscape that has no place for them.

Tragically, the desolate world Chao describes is the future: almost all the land in Sumatra and Kalimantan that is suited for oil palm has already been licensed to oil palm corporations—22 million hectares thus far, a third of Indonesia’s farmland. Now the corporations are fixated on Papua as the new frontier. Much of the land in Papua is peatland and swamp forest, quite unsuited for oil palm, but corporations owned by multinationals and Indonesian tycoons are taking it anyway—more than 3 million hectares thus far—backed by government officials who are paid for issuing plantation licenses (Varkkey 2012; Transformasi untuk Keadilan Indonesia [TuK] 2018; Chain Reaction Research 2019). Hence, money will still flow, contractors will contract, forests will be felled, and roads will be built even if not a single palm is planted.

In the government’s eyes, as Chao shows, Marind people are primitives and their dependence on the forests is evidence of their backwardness. Their success in sustaining themselves for countless generations with knowledge and skill count for nothing since they do not produce for markets and furnish no profits for middlemen or payoffs to government officials. According to Indonesia’s land law, Marind people have no legal right to their customary land—they are mere squatters on the state-claimed forest. Hence, from a government perspective, taking over their lands and forests has no cost—and as for the people, they are, in the words of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, “like mosquitos,” a nuisance to be flicked out of the way (Geertz 1963, 110).

Corporations and their government allies make no provisions for how Marind people and other customary landholders will sustain themselves once their land and forest is gone. The prospect of plantation jobs is hollow since most jobs go to migrants, and many Marind hesitate to work for corporations that have wreaked such devastation. But sustaining themselves in the old way is increasingly difficult: plantation corporations do not just occupy some of the land, they occupy all of it; and when multiple plantations are located side by side, they leave no space for customary landholders to survive. Rather, plantations “creep right up to the edge of the villages, encroaching on sago groves, hunting zones, sacred graveyards, and ceremonial sites” (p. 20). Marind people cannot move away to avoid oil palms; they are forced to live in their shadow.

As the map in Fig. 1 shows, in the district of Merauke, where Chao focused her research, oil palm plantation concessions (white lines), industrial timber plantation concessions (white dashes),

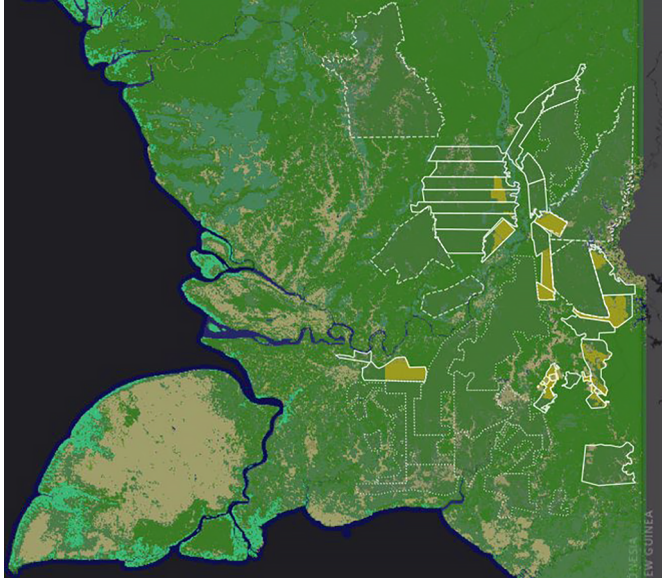


Fig. 1 Merauke District, West Papua
Source: Nusantara Atlas (2022)

and logging concessions (dotted lines) have taken control over huge areas, excluding previous land users and land uses in the name of corporate-led development.

Chao brings to her writing two sensibilities: that of an activist researching the dispossessory dynamics of oil palm expansion across the Southeast Asian region (Colchester and Chao 2011), and that of an anthropologist steeped in contemporary theorizing around multispecies being and critiques of the residual coloniality of anthropology. This book demonstrates both sensibilities, but its tone is set by the second: it is the words, practices, and analyses of Chao's Marind interlocutors and their entanglement with multispecies kin, living and dead, that direct the narrative. The author explains how she designed her fieldwork in collaboration with her Marind hosts, respecting their decisions about what she should write about and how they wanted their lives and struggles to be represented. The book is based on 18 months of fieldwork, much of it spent with Marind families in the sago groves. It was during these ventures that Chao learned how Marind people live, work, play, recall histories and adventures, and map out their worlds through stories and relationships. The subject matter could easily lend itself to exoticism, but there is no trace of it in Chao's careful prose. Nor does Chao succumb to the temptation to end the book with a redemptive twist—as if Marind peoples' survivance somehow outweighs the devastation and the reader can relax. Chao notes that she is still haunted by everything she experienced, and I am still haunted by her writing. It is an exceptional book on all counts—theoretically astute, ethnographically rigorous, and above all profoundly moving.

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Public Health in Asia during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Global Health Governance, Migrant Labour, and International Health Crises

ANOMA P. VAN DER VEERE, FLORIAN SCHNEIDER, and CATHERINE YUK-PING LO, eds.
Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022.

Global Health and South Asia in a Time of Crisis: A Short Review

Introduction

Even though the Covid-19 pandemic may soon be behind us, researchers will be occupied for years trying to better understand its causes and how to handle the complex issues it brought up (Ali *et al.* 2024). Choosing the right actions required to address public health concerns in an effective manner while preserving confidence in public authority will be one of the challenges facing policymakers going forward (Aslam and Gunaratna 2022). In that regard *Public Health in Asia during the COVID-19 Pandemic* is relevant and provides some guidance, though it leaves certain significant holes unfilled. The chapters in this edited volume provide an extensive study of the worldwide