

Abidin Kusno. *Visual Cultures of the Ethnic Chinese in Indonesia*. London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. 207 pp.

Sharon Carstens

Given the suppression of public expressions of Chinese culture during Indonesia's New Order period, this book's title is immediately enticing, promising to add to the expanding and shifting scholarship on post-1998 Chinese Indonesians that has broadened our views and conveyed new understandings of the Chinese Indonesian experience. As an anthropologist who teaches a course in Visual Anthropology, I was especially interested in how the author's focus on visual cultures could add to the insights of recent publications such as Karen Strassler's focus on Chinese Indonesian photographers in *Refracted Visions* and Aimee Dawis's work on Chinese Indonesian media and collective memory.¹ As with Strassler and Dawis, Abidin Kusno repeatedly reminds us of the many ways in which the targeting of Indonesian Chinese has also made visibility a threat, and he thus pays considerable attention as well to what is hidden or concealed.

The colorful visual image on the book's cover shows a "traditional" Chinese earth god shrine next to a Chinese roofed gateway with Chinese characters (西河) leading into a narrow urban alley, suggesting that the book will focus on these immediately recognizable and somewhat stereotypical features of Chinese visual culture. However, it is significant that these sorts of public icons of "Chineseness" are mostly absent from Abidin Kusno's examinations of visual representation. Even as public signs and celebrations of Chinese culture, both at Chinese New Year and in new suburban shophouse styles, have emerged in the past years, Kusno suggests that this recent openness is a move by the Indonesian state to tranquilize and even erase memories of the violent targeting of Chinese in past disturbances. And he asserts that many Chinese Indonesians prefer to avoid the visibility that has made them vulnerable in the past.

The book's eight chapters are composed of a series of stand-alone essays that were written over a fifteen-year period, and which cover a range of visual representations. About half of the essays have been previously published. Given the author's architectural background, it is not surprising that a good deal of attention is paid to the visual messages conveyed in a range of building styles over time, and to the roles of Chinese Indonesian developers and architects in shaping Java's largest cities. Three chapters also analyze different types of visual media that include cartoons, a film, and a family photo album.

The Introduction lays out the collection's major questions and themes that center on the conundrum of Indonesian Chinese identity, namely, being caught between often stereotypical understandings of Chinese heritage with its connections to the

Sharon Carstens is a professor of anthropology at Portland State University.

¹ See: Karen Strassler, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); and Aimee Dawis, *The Chinese of Indonesia and Their Search for Identity: The Relationship between Collective Memory and the Media* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2009).

Chinese homeland and a continued precarious outsider status in the Indonesian nation. Kusno asks what various types of visual representations tell us about how ethnic Chinese see themselves and represent themselves to others. He is interested in the visual as “a political site for the rethinking of identity and cultures,” which leads him to ask how “different modes of visual representation help to produce, and are in turn produced by social conflict” (3). The time frame for these questions ranges across “the long twentieth century,” a period during which different political regimes have shaped divergent Chinese positions and possibilities.

The first chapter focuses on the aftermath of the May 1998 riots in Jakarta’s Glodok district that targeted Chinese individuals and businesses. Chinese women were raped, and shophouses, shopping malls, markets, and other structures were left in a state of ruin. The Chinese population was traumatized.. Kusno explores how the district now presents itself through new forms of architecture, through a struggle to preserve a Chinese heritage building, and in public celebrations of the Chinese New Year. He observes that the architecture of two new major complexes, Glodok Plaza and Pasar Glodok, erected to replace structures destroyed in the 1998 riots, convey images of a bright technological future or harken back to a multicultural colonial era. In both instances, the designs erase all connections with the previous structures and thus also the memories of the traumatic riots that destroyed them. Kusno sees the new visibility of Chinese culture and its promotion by the state as a byproduct of the riots that aims to appease and to avoid acknowledgement of state complicity in those attacks on Chinese. He contrasts the absence of any public memorials about the riots with personal memories portrayed through a graphic-novel account of the riots as told through the eyes of three people of different generations forty years in the future.

The second chapter explores the interpretive meanings of Chinese shophouses known as *ruko*, tracing shifts in the structure’s form and significance over time. In the eyes of many Indonesians, the *ruko*, with a ground-floor shop and residence above, represents frugal Chinese and their focus on money making, even though not all Chinese live in *ruko*, and not all *ruko* belong to Chinese. Kusno speculates that the original single-story *ruko* grew to two stories as a protective measure against repeated ethnic violence, and that the proliferation of large billboards on these shops beginning in the 1970s was a move to disguise the Chinese character of these buildings. Nevertheless, *ruko* were targeted during the May 1998 riots, prompting non-Chinese shopkeepers to put signs on their doors to fend off looters. The chapter ends with a description of a new style of commercial *ruko* that no longer combines business and residence and that are now disconnected from Chinese identity. Nevertheless, the new *ruko* still seem to inspire suspicions among at least some members of the general public that immoral activities are likely happening within the buildings. Unlike the old style *ruko*, these new buildings no longer have sidewalk space for street vendors, and thus clearly divide those with property from those without. This is an interesting observation, but the identities of these former sidewalk traders and their relationships to Chinese *ruko* owners are not clear, nor is it clear how these new types of *ruko* connect to Chinese Indonesians.

The middle three chapters examine the multiple messages of visual media conveyed through popular Chinese films, comics, illustrated martial art stories, the Indonesian film *Gie*, and a family photo album. Chapter three begins with questions

about the relatively recent rise in popularity of Japanese and Korean pop culture in Indonesia. Kusno believes that phenomenon has been shaped by the cultural policy toward the Indonesian Chinese during the New Order period and the types of Chinese media (mainly kungfu and gangster films) that were allowed to circulate during that time. Unfortunately, there is no mention of similar media trends in other Southeast Asian countries with different histories, and the lack of a broader context here weakens this argument. The most interesting discussion in this chapter focuses on an analysis of three Chinese Indonesian comic writers from different periods and the multiple connections among their visual styles, the languages used (or not used), and the politics of the time.

Chapter four explores the multiple messages of the 2005 historical film *Gie*. It is an account of Soe Hok Gie, a young Indonesian Chinese activist of the 1960s, who is fashioned as a new type of Indonesian hero meant to inspire the nation's youth. However, even though on its surface this film seems to give recognition and visibility to Chinese Indonesian political contributions to nation-building, Kusno describes how the plot and visual images instead construct a character who is disassociated from the usual signs of Chineseness and whose significance rests on moral rather than political authority.

Chapter five presents a visual reading of a wealthy Peranakan family's photo album that comprises photos taken between the 1920s and 1950s. The chapter examines both the pictures and the composition of the album as expressions of ethnic Chinese identity (and the intersection of ethnic, class, and national identities) in the context of the changing times of the late colonial era. These images show Kee family members in mostly Western-style dress and living in Western-style residences, but still firmly focused on family. While the presence of Javanese servants in some photos signals the family's class position, Kusno argues that the absence of Dutch figures suggests that the Kees were confident in their own connections to the modern world, which need not be channeled through the Dutch colonial presence.

The last section of this book, aptly subtitled "Visionary/(In)Visibility," details the contributions of ethnic Chinese Indonesian developers and architects to the urban built environment of Java's largest cities. This is the least visually oriented section of the book, although it provides interesting insight into the ways that Chinese Indonesian developers and architects positioned themselves and skillfully maneuvered within the multiple political and economic constraints of the Suharto and post-Suharto periods.

One of the key strengths of this book is the careful contextualization of visual images in different time periods, showing how they communicated responses to opportunities and challenges for Indonesian Chinese in their evolving relations with Indonesian society and the Indonesian state. Another strength is Kusno's ability to draw on memories of his own experiences of growing up in Indonesia in the post-1965 period, although there are times when his own positionality could have been more clearly delineated. Visual images are certainly multivocal in the messages that they convey to different audiences, and Kusno does sometimes cite the interpretations of others, and he acknowledges that there are many ways of reading visual signs. But his reliance on his own analytical lens for the bulk of his interpretations leaves me wondering how these visual images might be read in similar or different ways by

Chinese Indonesians from different regional and class backgrounds. Here I'm thinking especially of the multiple voices of Dawis's informants drawn from a range of Indonesian backgrounds and their different understandings of Chinese Indonesian identities.² Finally, although I understand the importance of downplaying connections with China and emphasizing the Indonesian context in local identity formation, there are a number of instances in the book where a broader comparative framework that included other Southeast Asian Chinese would have sharpened and clarified both the similarities and differences in the Indonesian Chinese situation.

² Dawis, *The Chinese of Indonesia and Their Search for Identity*.