

Activist archives: Youth culture and the political past in Indonesia

By DOREEN LEE

Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. Pp. 217. Notes, Bibliography, Index.
doi:10.1017/S0022463418000097

Doreen Lee's *Activist archives: Youth culture and the political past in Indonesia* is a unique take on the recent history of activism in Indonesia. Instead of delving into the political narrative of the relationship between the state, civil society and activists, Lee looks into the production of youth activism in the late New Order period through various 'technologies'. She looks at how exactly middle-class university students transmogrified into youth activists who had an impact on Indonesian history; how exactly did these activists connect their historical presence with the *Pemuda fever*, a kind of repository of memories, emotions and imaginaries linking present youths to their iconic historical past, while at the same time recreating the spaces in which these memories could be played out in the city.

In order to do this, Lee looks at various cultural or technological aspects that shaped this late New Order youth culture as well as the memory of their activism. This includes personal archives, city streets and the domestic spaces of rented rooms, 'headquarters' and 'meeting places', and the wider youth culture and relationships along with its culture of violence. These historical, cultural and spatial aspects all contributed to the creation of a specific historically rooted social type; the activists who obtained their legitimacy as youths of the nation. This active referencing to the metanarrative of the earlier revolutionary youth also guided the activists during and after the fall of the New Order regime, imbuing them with a historical sense of legitimacy that was potent yet prone to commodification. Lee divides her book into these various 'technologies' of production and each chapter explores how these various aspects played a part in creating the Indonesian youth activists.

The first chapter discusses archives, in particular how archives were produced without necessarily being documented; how they remained secret and were meant to be 'burned after reading'. In fact, the discussion dwells on the fact that there were no proper archives about the activists during and after the New Order. Yet, there was a constant reproduction and reconnection to the metanarrative of 'national youth'. The second chapter discusses how the strategies and performativity related to activism on the street — the so-called 'demo' or demonstration sites. These streets were narrativised by activists as a form of popular history; the consumption of these narratives was part of the act of participating in the movement.

The third chapter discusses the activists' clothing styles as again sites of memory, and their appropriation of the T-shirt — bearing the image of Che Guevara or Karl Marx or the local hero Soe Hok Gie, for example — as a means to integrate their activism with global and historical narratives.

The fourth chapter delves into how violence was perpetrated not just by the state against the activists/people, but also by the activists themselves. A culture of violence permeated the interactions amongst and between both sides, that is, not just on the part of the aggressors, but also the activist victims (*korban*) themselves, supported by the latter's moral claims. The fifth chapter discusses the 'domiciliation that links the

cell of the prison to the camping/staging ground of the emergency shelter (*posko*) and the rented room (*in de kost*)' (p. 148). It looks at domestic space as a 'technology' that helped create a type of middle-class activist youth. Lee considers these physical spaces as containing information on these students' worldviews and practices. The last chapter discusses youth 'identity's uneven integration into post-Suharto Indonesia' (p. 179) by looking at the discourse amongst activists during the 2004 election. This election represented the end of *Pemuda fever* and its domestication and commodification by the political establishment into money and status-making ritual enactments. The youth activists became *tokoh* (prominent figures), and their new legitimacy became a mechanism to contractually engage with the elites, thereby turning the activists into a new type of social brokers.

Lee's account of the production and ultimate commodification of the historically bounded phenomenon of Indonesian youth activists has the potential to serve as a comparative model for the study of the production of such activists during the early years of Indonesia's national awakening. We have the great analytical works of Takashi Shiraishi or Benedict Anderson on the rise of Indonesian nationalism during the early twentieth century, yet there is very little discussion in this book on the phenomenological structures and 'technologies' that encouraged and enabled the rise of a certain social type of rebellious youth with a mission. This lack of *longue durée* historical analysis is a bit disappointing, yet completely understandable as Lee herself is not an historian.

This exploration into Indonesian youth culture and its discourses does not explore the viewpoints of individual actors, who come and go in the narrative, but never long enough to tell their personal stories, however. The account is rather heavily analytical while forgetting to touch the ground, so to speak. This may perhaps be rooted in Lee's choice of discussing various overarching aspects of this youth culture, rather than privilege individual voices. Despite this, *Activist archives: Youth culture and the political past in Indonesia* is undoubtedly a significant contribution to the anthropological analysis of youths and political culture in modern Indonesian history.

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Myanmar

A delicate relationship: The United States and Burma/Myanmar since 1945

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Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015. Pp. xi + 409. Figures, Map, Endnotes, Appendix, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463418000103

In November 2012, Barack Obama paid the first visit to Burma, or Myanmar, by a US head of state. The widely-shared photograph of the American president embracing an uncomfortable Aung San Suu Kyi, kissing her cheek in a move breaching Myanmar's social etiquette, could have provided a good illustration of the 'delicate'