

Indies prison notebooks

During World War II, one's chances of survival depended very much on one's race. This was most certainly the case in the Siantar (North Sumatra) prison in the former Dutch East Indies, then under Japanese occupation. From the painstakingly detailed accounts by Kho An Kim in his *Pendjara Fasis* [Fascist Prison],¹ we learn that only 252 of the 536 detainees in the Siantar prison survived the Pacific War. As the prisoners were organized according to their race, the mortality rate in Siantar is quite telling: 66% of the European prisoners perished during internment, 62% of the 'Indonesians' (mostly Ambonese, Manadonese, Timorese, and Javanese soldiers of the former colonial army), and only 1% of the Chinese detainees (7 out of 95). Death did not come to all – it came to some before it got to others.

Elizabeth Chandra

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS, by Chinese political prisoners during the first half of the 1940s, are quick to demonstrate that the logic of 'plural society' also operated in the Japanese prisons and especially internment camps. Here, detainees were housed and segregated along racial lines, had their respective appointed spokespersons (through whom rules, announcements and duties were socialized), took turns using prison facilities and, as a result, were responsive only to the wellbeing of their own group. The divisions explain the remarkable difference in mortality rates along racial lines. In their defence, Kho mentions the occasions when Chinese prisoners, out of pity, assisted other inmates with provisions. In general, however, group solidarity ruled.

Arrested memory

Among the accounts by the Chinese in the Japanese internment camps, none is more telling than the above-mentioned memoir by Kho, and that by Nio Joe Lan, entitled *Dalem Tawanan Djepang* [In Japanese Detention]² – both prominent Chinese writers in respectively Medan and Batavia. Kho was detained for allegedly aiding a Kuomintang undercover agent; Nio for his affiliation with *Keng Po*, a newspaper that was critical of the Japanese expansionist policy. Kho was imprisoned for fifteen months in Siantar; Nio for over three years in three different prisons in western Java. Both Kho and Nio credit the high survival rate of Chinese prisoners to local and national community organizations, such as *Partai Peranakan-Tionghoa* (Indies-Chinese Party), the Chinese Anti-Fascist Association, and *Hua Chiao Chung Hui* (HCCH, Chinese Central Organization). These organizations lobbied prison superintendents to allow aid, such as food, medicine, clothes, and cash, to reach Chinese detainees. Starvation and malnutrition was the primary cause of death in Siantar, while in the Cimahi camp, a f10 monthly stipend from HCCH helped Chinese prisoners supplement their inadequate diet by purchasing food items from the prison management. Their stipend also allowed Chinese prisoners to purchase bread from fellow Dutch inmates on the rare days this luxury was rationed.

Both Kho and Nio made interesting remarks about the Dutch/European groups with whom they were interned. They sympathized with this group because, unlike the Chinese, Javanese, Ambonese and other prisoners, the Dutch were often sent to camps with their whole families, including women and children. This meant there were no, or fewer, family members or community organizations supplying them with basic necessities from outside, or lobbying prison administrators on their behalf. In addition to selling their share of bread, Nio relates how Dutch prisoners collected (for consumption) scraps of cassava skins from the Chinese kitchen, and happily accepted the scraps of clothing from Chinese inmates when the latter received donations from outside. When the Japanese occupation ended, other prisoners could return home where their families waited; but the vacant homes of many of the Dutch prisoners had, in the meantime, been seized or vandalized.

This differential treatment during Japanese internment did not seem to end with the Dutch prisoners' repatriation. Whilst in Holland researching the wartime literature, I couldn't help but notice the absence of this particular memory of World War II among the many war monuments in the country. While one often comes upon monuments honouring those *Gevallen in de Strijd voor het Vaderland* between 1940 and 1945 ('in memory to the fallen'), the same does not hold for those who perished abroad in the colony. The few monuments

devoted to the Indies experience are much more recent, and generally do not figure in the national memory. Those who died in the Japanese prison camps in Indonesia, it seems, lack the moral justification to be similarly commemorated. The Indies Dutch victims were casualties of another front line, perhaps, and not at home defending the fatherland – as if 'home' could safely be extricated from the colonies overseas. The subtext of an Indies memorial is inevitably problematic and precarious.

But it has been interesting to see that even though the Indies experience rarely figures in the Dutch memory of World War II, accounts of it have been widely available in the form of personal and family memoirs. The same cannot be said about the Chinese in Indonesia, for whom the experience has remained an arrested history. After the transfer of sovereignty, Indonesia went through a process of national consolidation in many facets of life that overrode narratives of groups (local or ethnic). Not unlike the handful of Indonesian colonial collaborators, many of the Chinese political prisoners were those suspected of pro-China or anti-Japan activities; e.g., activists of the Tjin Tjay Hwee movement who raised funds for China during the Sino-Japanese conflicts in the 1930s.³ For these groups, their stories did not fit neatly into the national historical narrative. That is, until recently. Now that it is becoming increasingly more acceptable in Indonesia to speak with a 'Chinese' voice, Nio's account has been republished (in 2008). Kho's prison memoir, however, remains largely unknown and hard to access; it is currently preserved by the Royal Netherlands Institute for Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) library and in the Cornell University Rare and Manuscripts Collections. (KITLV is in the process of making it, along with other Sino-Malay literary publications, available for the public online.)

Some prisons were more equal than others

An important observation to be made of the prison accounts written in the 1940s is that the experience was not homogeneous. This is mostly due to the volatility of politics in a period so aptly captured in the title of Tan Moh Goan's journalistic novel, *Doenia Terbalik* [Topsy Turvy World].⁴ One only needs to compare two memoirs, Oey Tiang Tjoei's *Pengalaman Kita Dalem Pengasingan* [My Experience in Internment]⁵ and Pouw Kioe An's *198 Hari Dalem Koengkoengan Kenpeitai* [198 Days under Kenpeitai Detention],⁶ to grasp the fluidity of power, position and alliances in the first half of the 1940s. Chronicling his experience of internment (by the Dutch government) in Nusakambangan, Oey relates the delight with which he witnessed, from prison cell, the Japanese shelling of Cilacap, which he interpreted as an indication of his imminent freedom. Ironically, his account is as heartfelt as Pouw's admission of growing optimism for his own discharge when the Allied bombardments in the vicinity of his prison became increasingly more frequent. Pouw's memoir also notes the arbitrary ways in which the Japanese military police (*Kenpeitai*) decided which individuals were to be detained.

Furthermore, while most prison accounts are gloomy and bitter in temperament, no two prisons were alike, in terms of conditions. Kho's account, for instance, is entirely bleak; physical torture and starvation feature centrally. Nio's memoir, on the other hand, has room for humour and describes occasions when individual humanity seemed to prevail in subhuman conditions. Kho describes in detail one particularly painful interrogation technique, used by *Kenpeitai*, to extract information: "a technique that involved pouring water over the prisoner's cloth-covered face to inflict the sensation of



Above left: 'Kho': from Kho An Kim's *Pendjara Fasis*. Courtesy of 'Cornell University Rare and Manuscript Collections'. Above right: 'Pouw': from Pouw Kioe An's *198 Hari dalem Koengkoengan Kenpeitai*. Photo taken by author.

drowning." (He would no doubt be appalled by the recent decision by the United States President Bush administration that this method of interrogation we now know as 'waterboarding' does not constitute torture.)

In Nio's prison, hunger was not the biggest problem, but rather access to alternative and nutritious food (which required cash). Nio even has a chapter devoted to the prison music program and other forms of entertainment that the internees put together to distract themselves. This might also have been because many of his fellow inmates could have been included in the "Who's Who" of the Chinese communities of western Java: the top ranks of Sin Po, Keng Po and other news organizations, wealthy industrialists, civil bureaucrats and other socially prominent individuals, like major Khouw Kim An, who passed away during internment on New Year's Eve (1944). The music program was especially remarkable, according to Nio, because it was organized by professional (European) musicians who happened to be touring the Indies when Japan invaded.

There is an oft-repeated story about internees in Semarang, Central Java, who were supposedly housed in an orphanage, operated by a Dutch matron and assisted by Dutch girls. This particular detention facility, Nio relays, was run like a hostel; prisoners had individual rooms, slept on folding beds, and wore formal attire outside their rooms. This exact same description was repeated in an account by Lie Hoo Soen, a manager of the Semarang-based business empire Oei Tjong Ham Concern, who was reportedly incarcerated in this facility.⁷ The likeness of the two accounts, down to the details of recreational fishing trips in the accompaniment of Dutch girls, makes them suspect. One wonders if this is a case of an internalized urban legend, claimed as a personal memory.

The Chinese wartime accounts are especially significant because the 1940s was a turning point in Indonesian history that affected Chinese and non-Chinese populations in different ways. Yet the framing of studies on this period is rarely from a Chinese perspective. Not unlike the Indies Dutch wartime memory, the national narrative has taken precedence, overriding all other narratives and human stories. Much more thus remains to be uncovered.

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Notes

- 1 Kho An Kim. 1947. *Pendjara Fasis, atau Dari Neraka ke Neraka*. Medan: Toko Boekoe Djaman.
- 2 Nio Joe Lan. 1946. *Dalem Tawanan Djepang (Boekit-Doeri, Serang, Tjimahi): Penoeoeran Pengidoepan Interneeran pada Djeman Pendoedoekan Djepang*. Djakarta-Kota: Lotus Co.
- 3 Dixi (pseudonym). 1946. "Bangsa Tionghoa di Indonesia pada zaman Djepang." *Malang Post* no.1, pp.8-9.
- 4 Tan Moh Goan. 1949. *Doenia Terbalik*. Djakarta: Tjilik Roman's.
- 5 Oey Tiang Tjoei. 1942. *Pengalaman Kita dalem Pengasingan Garoet-Soekaboemi dan Noesakambangan (Tjilatjap)*. Djakarta: Hong-Po.
- 6 Pouw Kioe An. 1947. *198 Hari dalem Koengkoengan Kenpeitai*. Malang: Perfectas.
- 7 Go Sien Ay. April 2007. "Lie Hoo Soen digantung Jepang karena membela Oei Tjong Hauw, putera Oei Tiong Ham," *Sinergi Indonesia* no.49, pp.53-6.

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