

# Indonesian Studies in Melbourne: Honouring the Past, Celebrating the Future

Australia has a history of more than 65 years of formal tertiary education in Indonesian language, culture and society. The University of Melbourne has played a foundational role in this area of studies. On 28 and 29 September 2021, the University's Indonesian Studies program organised a public lecture and international conference to celebrate and reflect on the development of Indonesian Studies in Australia. The two-part program aimed at generating international dialogue, intergenerational knowledge transfer and interdisciplinary discussion by bringing together Language, Culture and Area Studies experts as well as the broader Indonesia and Southeast Asia-interested community. A central focus point and source of inspiration was scholar, public intellectual and Foundation Professor of Indonesian Studies at The University of Melbourne, the late Arief Budiman (1941–2020). The event marked the start of an annual Arief Budiman Public Lecture series.

Indonesian language teaching commenced at The University of Melbourne in the mid-1950s. This development took place in a dynamic era of regional cultural diplomacy, in which Indonesian cultural activists and intellectuals declared themselves 'heirs to world culture'. These were also the formative years of Budiman, who became a signatory of the so-called Cultural Manifesto in 1963. This manifesto, which emphasised creative and intellectual freedom, was subsequently banned by the government. In Budiman's spirit, the Indonesian Studies program at The University of Melbourne today aims to educate a new generation of world citizens: cosmopolitan, socially engaged, and with a deep understanding and appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity.

The inaugural Arief Budiman Public Lecture, titled 'Arief Budiman and His Family: Cultural Politics under Guided Democracy',

was delivered by Prof. Charles A. Coppel, who himself has played a key role in the development of Indonesian Studies at The University of Melbourne. Coppel explained how national politics under President Sukarno's Guided Democracy (1959–1965) was polarised between the 'progressive revolutionary' forces including communists and radical nationalists on the one hand and those opposed to them including anti-communists in the military and religious parties on the other. Opposing views about ethnicity, literature and culture in general were caught up in the hothouse of national politics. In his lecture, Coppel showed how Arief Budiman and his family illuminated this process in Indonesian modern history.

The international conference in the second part of the program, titled 'Citizens of the World: Indonesian Studies in Australia', steered discussions about past, current, and future directions of Indonesian Studies along the

various types of border-crossing epitomised by Budiman and his students: between various disciplines, between academia and activism, and between Indonesia, Australia and the World. Consisting of four panels, each with their own subthemes, it sought to address the following key question: how to respond to the challenges of teaching and researching languages, cultures and regions in the context of late capitalism?

The first panel, titled 'Border-crossing Literature and Language', had presentations by Dr Intan Paramaditha (Macquarie University), Dr Lily Yulianti Farid (Monash University) and Ms Dewi Anggraeni (independent author). The second panel, with Dr Irfan Wahyudi (Universitas Airlangga), Dr Hellena Souisa (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) and Mr Tito Ambyo (RMIT University), discussed 'The Digital Turn in Media and Communication'. The participants in the third panel, titled 'International

Relations and Development in the Anthropocene', were Dr Poppy Sulistyning Winanti (Universitas Gadjah Mada), Prof Nyoman Darma Putra (Universitas Udayana) and Dr Ina Hunga (Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana). The fourth and final panel, with Dr Inaya Rakhmani (Universitas Indonesia), Prof Bernard Arps (Universiteit Leiden) and Dr Seng Yu Jin (National Gallery Singapore), specifically focused on 'Area Studies under Late Capitalism'.

Overall, the conference confirmed that Indonesian Studies is much more than a pragmatic, external tool for communicating elsewhere defined solutions in the international arena. Instead, it is at the very core of generating complex approaches to the difficult issues of our times.

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## Arief Budiman and his Family: Cultural politics under Guided Democracy

Charles A. Coppel and John R. Maxwell

Arief Budiman was appointed as the Foundation Professor of Indonesian Studies at the University of Melbourne in 1997, holding the Chair until his retirement in 2008. This essay provides an overview of him and his family in the political and cultural context of what Sukarno, Indonesia's first President, called *Demokrasi Terpimpin* (Guided Democracy).

Arief's original name was Soe Hok Djin, but for convenience here Arief Budiman will be used throughout. (He changed his name in 1967 with his marriage to Leila Chairani Baharsyah.) In discussing the Soe family, the focus is on Arief himself, his father Soe Lie Piet, and his younger brother Soe Hok Gie. These three men were all precocious readers and writers. They were all ethnic Chinese born in Jakarta in the 20th century, oriented to the land in which they were born, and not at all oriented to China. None of them was Dutch-educated.

Arief later described the family in which he grew up as "lower middle-class" with "no academic background whatever." His father Soe Lie Piet [Fig. 1], a writer and journalist, was often "unemployed or only half-employed."

There are some important generational differences between Soe Lie Piet and his sons. Soe Lie Piet (1904–1988) grew up when the colonial Netherlands Indies was at its height, while his sons were the product of the Japanese occupation and the turmoil in which the Indonesian Republic was born. Although Soe Lie Piet was brought up in the household of his grandfather, an immigrant from Hainan, he was cared for and indulged by his maiden aunts, who spoke the Malay language typical of *peranakan* Chinese in Jakarta. His schooling was in an ethnic Chinese environment, primarily in the Tiong Hoa Hwe Koan (THHK) school, where he was instructed in Mandarin Chinese and later in English. From the 1930s he became a prominent Chinese Malay writer of popular romances in which the leading characters were Chinese, although the settings were often in different parts of the Indies and influenced by local magical and mystical beliefs.

His sons were brought up in a Malay-speaking home in Kebon Jeruk, an ethnically mixed part of Jakarta with a significant Chinese component. When they were young, their mother read them Chinese Malay stories,

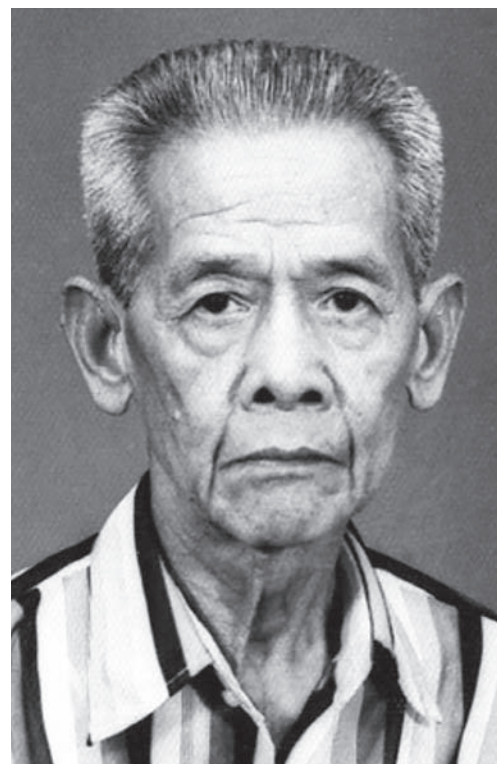


Fig. 1: Soe Lie Piet, 1982  
(Photo courtesy of John Maxwell).

leading them to seek out comic books and then more serious reading from nearby lending libraries. Almost all of their schooling was in the new national language (*bahasa Indonesia*) with an Indonesian curriculum. They were taught to speak and write standard Indonesian and to avoid the kind of Malay that their father had used professionally. They may have found

their father's stories an embarrassment, both in terms of style and subject matter, if they had bothered to read anything he had written.

Soe Lie Piet was apparently never interested in politics, let alone politically active. In later life he withdrew into an introspective absorption with mysticism and the supernatural at a time when his two sons were becoming politically aware and active, taking courageous public stands on matters of principle. Their own writing engaged with politics at the national level, and they were both secular in outlook.

In his twenties, however, Soe Lie Piet had been a man on the move in search of employment as a journalist and writer. This took him to Medan and Palembang in Sumatra, to Surabaya in East Java, and to Bandung in West Java, where he married Nio Hoei An in 1933. In August 1934, they moved to Bali with a baby daughter, living there for nearly a year while Soe Lie Piet acted as correspondent for several Java-based publications. He also wrote several works based on his experiences there, including what were probably the first guides to Bali written in Malay, both published in 1935. His travels in search of gainful employment led him to places that also inspired several of his novels or short stories.<sup>1</sup>

After Bali, the family moved to Jakarta, where their second daughter was born in 1936, followed by their first son Soe Hok Djin (Arief) in January 1941. Although Soe Lie Piet published several more novels, the family's economic position soon became precarious. Under the shadow of war, his wife and her children returned to her mother's house in Bandung, while he stayed in Jakarta. In 1941, he joined the editorial staff of the newspaper



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