

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 Djinn, 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,

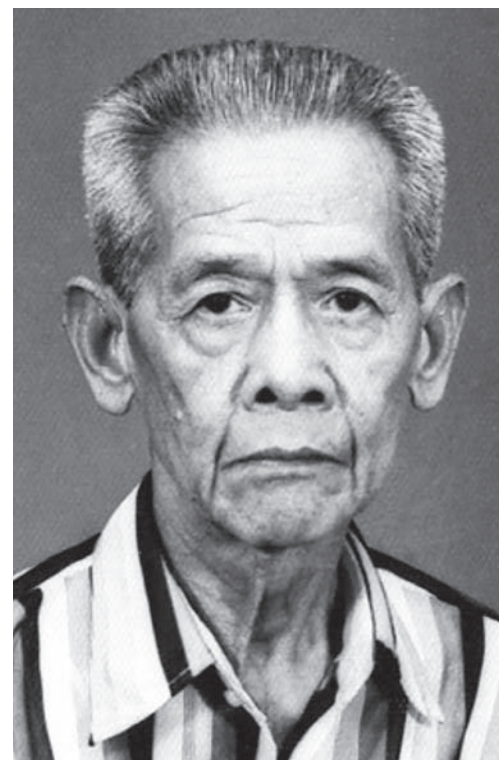


Fig. 1: Soe Lie Piet, 1982
(Photo courtesy of John Maxwell).

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.¹

After Bali, the family moved to Jakarta, where their second daughter was born in 1936, followed by their first son Soe Hok Djinn (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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Hong Po. During the occupation, Hong Po urged the Chinese community to support the Japanese war effort. There is nothing to suggest that the apolitical Soe Lie Piet himself was pro-Japanese, but the job gave him some protection at a time when prominent Chinese journalists were interned or went into hiding.

In 1942, his wife and children returned to Jakarta, for Soe Lie Piet at last had found a simple timber house in Kebon Jeruk, which would be the family home for the next four decades. Soe Hok Gie was born there in December 1942 and lived there until his death a day before his 27th birthday in December 1969. Kebon Jeruk was the neighbourhood where both brothers lived throughout their schooling and university years.

Arief lived on for another half century after his brother's death [Fig. 2]. It is an extraordinary and sad irony that when Arief died in Semarang on 23 April 2020, the headlines in the Indonesian press almost universally referred to him as Soe Hok Gie's older brother. Soe Hok Gie seems to have had an afterlife as an almost legendary figure [Fig. 3]. Why was this so? First, he had started to keep a diary in early 1957 at the age of 14, and an edited version was published in 1983.² The final entry is 6 December 1969, ten days before his sudden death from toxic gas near the summit of volcanic Mount Semeru. The diary is a fascinating insight into the maturing mind of an intelligent young man whose life was cut short prematurely. Then, in 2001, John Maxwell's biography of Soe Hok Gie was translated, published, and widely read in Indonesia.³ Finally, in 2005, Riri Riza's partly fictionalised biopic film *Gie* was released, receiving three awards for best film, best leading actor, and best cinematography at the Indonesian Film Festival. The public attention given to the short life of Soe Hok Gie through the film, the publication of his diaries, and the detailed biography help to explain those headlines when Arief died.⁴

The two brothers were close in age and experience but were clearly very different in several ways. Although Arief was the older by nearly two years, they were contemporaries at school and university. They were in the same class at primary school, completing in late 1955 with such high grades that they were able to apply for admission with reduced fees to the best secondary schools in Jakarta. Arief attended the prestigious Jesuit Canisius College throughout his secondary education, but Hok Gie was only there for the last three years. Arief was in the science stream while Hok Gie was in the humanities.

Their academic performance at Canisius enabled them to gain entry to the elite University of Indonesia in late 1961. Arief went to the Faculty of Psychology at the main Salemba campus, and Hok Gie to the Faculty of Letters at the Rawamangun campus. These separations – different lower secondary schools, different streams at Canisius, and different Faculties at the University of Indonesia – went beyond different developing interests. They also reflected an estrangement that lasted a decade, in which the two brothers virtually stopped speaking to one another.

At Canisius and the University of Indonesia, the brothers may have been to some extent outsiders, but not because they were ethnic Chinese. Neither was ever attracted to joining an association defined by their Chinese ethnicity since they clearly regarded themselves as Indonesian. Their socio-economic background was probably lower than most of their peers, but at the same time they were unusually well read and intellectually sophisticated for their age. They made strong friendships with those who shared their interests.

The political context of “Guided Democracy”

In 1959, using a Presidential decree, Sukarno returned Indonesia to the 1945 Constitution (which was weak on human rights and strong on presidential power) in a system he called “Guided Democracy.” In 1960 he suspended the elected parliament and replaced it with appointed members. No further elections were held. Unelected himself and with the backing of the military, Sukarno ruled by decree, using ideological formulas and slogans to

silence opposition and to ban critical media. The move to an authoritarian state grew over years, but from late 1963, with the support of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and radical nationalist parties, Sukarno promoted a strong turn to the left. Any person or institution whose loyalty was doubted was subjected to demands for “retooling.”

In many respects the late Guided Democracy regime embodied a personality cult. Sukarno was beyond public criticism, and in May 1963 was made President for Life by a body he had himself appointed. Those newspapers that were still allowed to appear were required to include extracts from his writings. Anti-communist Indonesians with close Western connections were under attack, especially if they dared to challenge the PKI or organizations close to it by trying to persuade the President to take a less leftist or authoritarian position. Arief Budiman and Soe Hok Gie moved in these circles during their university student years, and each took a public stand contrary to the increasingly radical spirit of the times.

There were two very large organizations that are relevant to this discussion, which were closely associated with Sukarno and the PKI. The first was LEKRA (*Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat* - Institute of People's Culture), claimed in 1963 to have 200 branches and 100,000 members. LEKRA took the “socialist realist” line that Indonesian culture should express Indonesian identity and serve the mass of the Indonesian people. It worked to suppress art and writing that failed to conform. The second was Baperki (*Badan Permusyawaratan Kewarganegaraan Indonesia* - Consultative Body for Indonesian Citizenship), established as a broad-based organization in 1954 to promote Indonesian citizenship for ethnic Chinese and oppose racial discrimination, and claiming a membership of over 280,000 by 1965. Under the leadership of its leftist chairman Siauw Giok Tjhan, Baperki supported Sukarno's Guided Democracy and was widely regarded as a member of the “progressive revolutionary forces.”

Arief, Sastra magazine, and the Manifesto Kebudayaan

When Arief entered the Psychology Faculty in 1961, he startled other students by discoursing on Jean-Paul Sartre and existentialism when he underwent the customary initiation process for new students. In fact, he had already translated a chapter of Albert Camus' novel *L'Étranger* into Indonesian. Arief had a passion for Camus. According

to his friend and fellow Psychology student Goenawan Mohamad, Arief's anti-Utopian worldview and determination were strongly influenced by Camus' book on *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He was already able to mix easily with established artists and intellectuals, and it was Arief, the boy from Kebon Jeruk, who introduced Goenawan to such circles.

In May 1961, the first issue appeared of *Sastra*, a literary magazine under the leadership of HB Jassin. Arief and his friend Goenawan were both contributors to the magazine, which was soon subjected to a sustained attack by LEKRA and other leftist writers. Indonesia's most famous novelist, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, accused *Sastra* of having a bourgeois character and slammed those like HB Jassin who sought “to seek shelter from the tumult of the revolution, and to dull themselves to sleep with the theory of ‘universal humanism.’” In 1963, *Sastra* awarded Arief a prize for his essay on “Man and Art.” The twenty-two-year-old Arief was a potential target.

In August that year a group of anti-communist artists and intellectuals issued a Cultural Manifesto (*Manifesto Kebudayaan*). Many of the signatories were writers, including Arief, Goenawan, and Jassin. It was intended as a statement of their beliefs and aspirations for Indonesian national culture, based on the principle of freedom of expression in art and literature and what they described as “universal humanism.” The Manifesto was derided by LEKRA and their supporters, who gave it the derogatory acronym “*Manikebu*” (“buffalo sperm”). A full-scale culture war broke out with calls for it to be crushed. On 8 May 1964, President Sukarno issued a decree banning the Manifesto. Calls followed for a purge of counter-revolutionary forces from all educational institutions. Jassin was removed from his lectureship at the University of Indonesia and *Sastra* ceased publication.

The young student-philosophers Arief and Gunawan were not prime targets of this campaign but nor were they completely safe in this increasingly restrictive environment. Thanks to their international connections, they were each in turn able to escape and gain safe haven for a while in Europe. The Congress for Cultural Freedom had set up a committee in Jakarta in 1956, which offered scholarships for study in Europe. Arief secured such a scholarship in 1964 and went to Paris and the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium. The Congress continued the scholarship for a second year, and this time the choice was Goenawan, who left Indonesia just days after the dramatic events in Jakarta on 1 October 1965.



Fig. 2: Arief Budiman in Canberra, 1997 (Photo courtesy of John Maxwell).

Soe Hok Gie and the assimilation movement

When Soe Hok Gie became a student in the Faculty of Letters at the University of Indonesia in late 1961, he met fellow history student Ong Hok Ham (1933–2007). Ong had written a series of articles in *Star Weekly* about the situation of the Chinese community in Indonesia. These culminated in February 1960 with an article arguing that the only way for the Chinese to overcome prejudice and discrimination was for them to “assimilate” themselves into the majority Indonesian population.

In late March 1960, a group of ten Chinese Indonesians published a Statement in *Star Weekly* under the heading “Toward a Proper Assimilation.” It was a provocative document. It quoted the President as approving intermarriage between Indonesians of different ethnic groups, and a statement by Baperki chairman Siauw Giok Tjhan that solving the minority problem by name-changing and biological assimilation was unwise, undemocratic and violated basic human rights, implying that Baperki was trying to impede the process of assimilation. As controversy mounted and the assimilation movement developed, Hok Gie was drawn in through his friendship with Ong. This was made easier because he had never been involved in exclusively Chinese organizations and also because of his own modest class background. In addition, many of the assimilationists had Indonesian Socialist Party (PSI) or Catholic connections, like Hok Gie himself.

On 22 February 1963, Hok Gie was one of a small group of assimilationists who visited President Sukarno to seek his endorsement for their activities. He had no suitable clothes, but a jacket several sizes too large was borrowed for the occasion. Sukarno gave them a statement that they were happy to use against Baperki.

This achieved, the President regaled the group and members of the palace circle with political gossip and talk about sex. Hok Gie had never been a fan of Sukarno, but he was even more appalled by the evidence of the President's lechery and venality – all duly noted in his diary. The President, however, was impressed by him, and later offered him a position in a history museum planned as part of the National Monument in central Jakarta. Hok Gie ignored the offer.

On campus, Hok Gie was active in the small Socialist University Students Movement (*Gerakan Mahasiswa Sosialis* - GEMSOS). They formed a study group in which they were addressed by prominent PSI-connected intellectuals, although GEMSOS was not formally affiliated with the banned PSI. Hok Gie was unimpressed by a number of the older PSI figures, who lived comfortable bourgeois lives. He dismissed them as “salon socialists.”

From his diary entries it is clear that his opposition to communism and totalitarianism was influenced by early exposure to the writings of ex-communists like George Orwell and Arthur Koestler. Despite this, he had some admiration for aspects of the PKI: its radical reform agenda; its attacks on big business, bureaucratic capitalists, and official corruption; and the reputation of its leaders for dedication, hard work, and moral probity as compared to other political figures.

Soe Hok Gie was very wary about stepping into the political arena. In a diary entry on 16 March 1964 he wrote:

In politics morality doesn't exist. As far as I'm concerned politics is something that's utterly dirty, it's filthy mud. But at a certain moment where we cannot restrain ourselves any further, then we will leap into it. Sometimes the moment arrives, as it did previously in the revolution. And if by some chance this moment comes I'm going to leap into this mud.

When the cataclysmic events of 1 October 1965 erupted in Jakarta, Hok Gie was actually with a group of his hiking friends heading for the slopes of Mount Merapi in Central Java. It was only after several days that they heard the news of the attempted coup against the army leadership and of the showdown between the army and the PKI that was underway.

Upon his return to Jakarta, he joined with a militant Islamic youth group in ransacking and burning of buildings associated with the PKI. By early 1966, he was an active leader in student demonstrations on the streets, expressing the Tritura (*Tri Tuntutan Rakyat* - Three Demands of the People): calling for the President to ban the PKI, to reshuffle the Cabinet, and to lower the price of basic commodities. This was part of a wider campaign by the newly formed KAMI (*Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Indonesia - University Student Action Front*), but his group of campus-based students from the Faculties of Letters and Psychology acted both autonomously and in concert with others. Among other activities, the demonstrators took their protests to cabinet ministers and even to the President. This was a risky business because Sukarno was recalcitrant and tried hard to restore his authority, encouraging those still loyal to him to confront the protesters.

Arief was unable to take an active part in these demonstrations because he had fallen seriously ill with tuberculosis. Nevertheless, behind the scenes, he worked with a group of writers and artists preparing placards and posters that were used by the demonstrators.

After Sukarno was compelled to surrender powers to General Soeharto on 11 March 1966 and action was taken on the students' demands, Hok Gie and Arief both engaged in preparing and writing scripts for broadcasts on the student Radio AMPERA. They worked together harmoniously and effectively. This was an important turning point in their personal relationship. The two brothers were also contributors to the two new student newspapers that appeared in mid-1966—the Jakarta daily *Harian KAMI* and the Bandung weekly *Mahasiswa Indonesia*—that were intent on attacking all aspects of the Old Order and its leadership.

In July 1966 the journalist and novelist Mochtar Lubis was released from detention. He had been visited in early March on several occasions while still in detention by both brothers who admired him for his principled opposition to Sukarno. Mochtar soon launched the magazine *Horison*, destined for a while to become Indonesia's leading literary magazine. Arief (still under the name Soe Hok Djinn) became a member of its original editorial board together with luminaries like the literary critic HB Jassin. At around the same time Hok Gie's very first article in the press appeared in the student weekly *Mahasiswa Indonesia* under the title 'Why I chose gaol – Mochtar Lubis and politics'.

Both brothers went on to become noted columnists in the mainstream press, particularly in *Kompas* and *Sinar Harapan*. But unlike many of their contemporaries, they

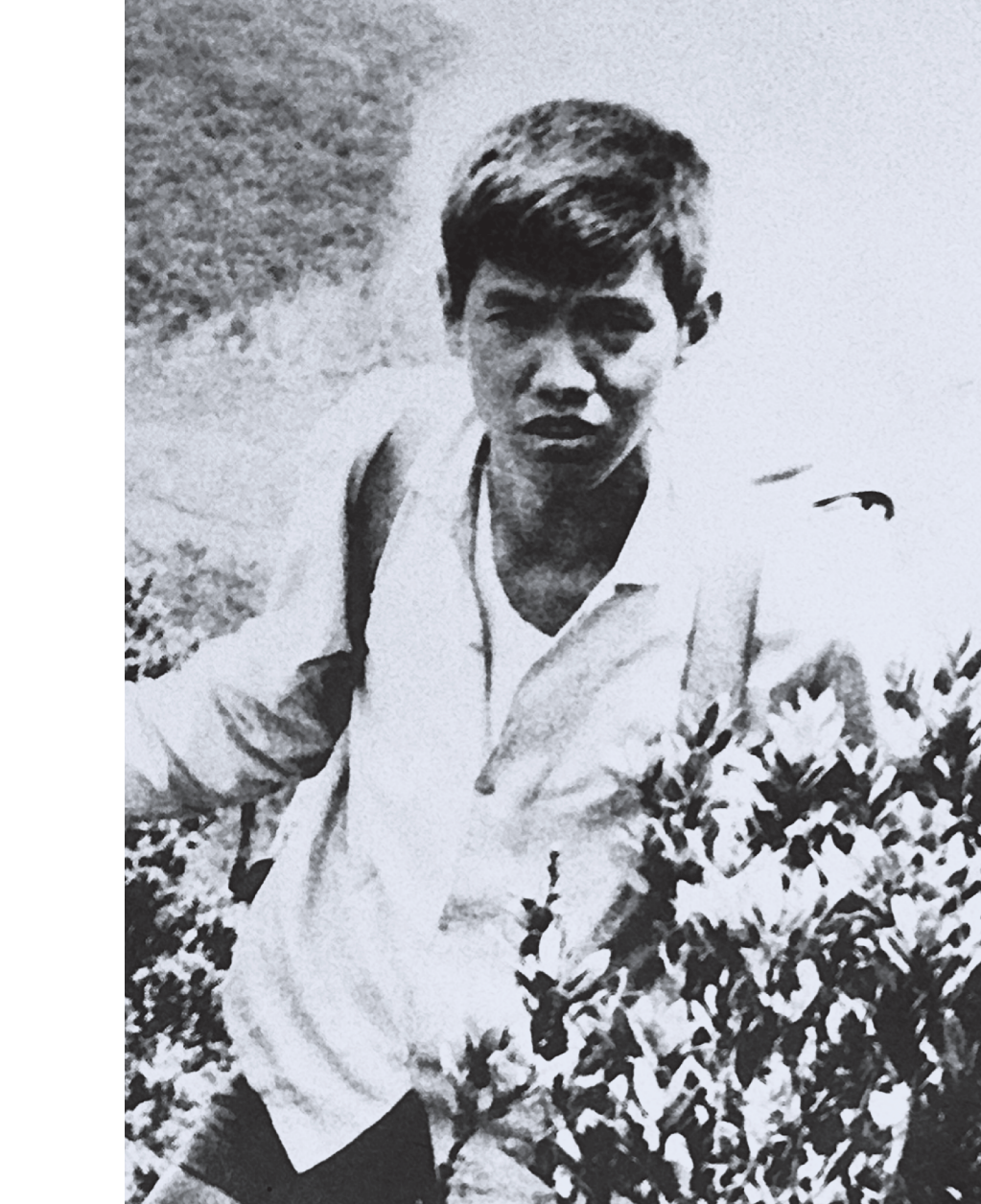


Fig. 3: Soe Hok Gie, approx. 1968 (Photo courtesy John Maxwell, original source unknown).

did not remain silent in the face of injustices. In particular, Hok Gie's two-part *Kompas* article in July 1967 on "The future social consequences of the Gestapu affair" was probably the first time that the horrendous scale of injustice and human suffering caused to the victims of the drive against the PKI and its affiliates after October 1965 was raised in the Indonesian press. In contrast to their friend Mochtar Lubis, both brothers took up the cause of the many thousands of political prisoners detained without charge or trial.

In the last phase of his life Hok Gie felt alone in his struggle. But as Arief stood beside his brother's coffin in East Java, he declared "Gie, you are not alone." Arief soon assumed

the mantle of the activist, moving beyond the spoken and written word by leading campaigns against corruption, boycotting the stage-managed New Order elections, and opposing the expensive Taman Mini theme park.

Both brothers were public intellectuals who were steadfast in their courage and consistent in their defence of freedom of expression and human rights. We can only speculate about what Hok Gie would have done had he lived. In the case of Arief, during a period of graduate studies in the United States, he was influenced by a wider range of ideas, including neo-Marxism. When he returned to Salatiga, his teaching of development studies and contextual literature during

the 1980s was anathema to some of his old friends and comrades.

Arief also came to regret the assimilationist movement and embraced the concept of a multicultural Indonesia in which Chinese culture had a place. He also recognised that the role of a public intellectual came at a cost to himself and his family. In his inaugural professorial lecture at the University of Melbourne, he paid tribute to his wife Leila, saying, "You all know it is far from easy to live as the wife of a person like me." And yet, despite that statement to his dead brother – "Gie, you are not alone" – the title of that lecture was "The Lonely Road of the Intellectual."⁵

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Notes

- 1 Soe Lie Piet, *Melantjong ka Bali (dari pengalaman sendiri 1 taon berdiri di Bali)* (Sightseeing in Bali based on a year's personal experience living in Bali), Penghidoepan XI, 131 November 1935, 80 pp; and *Pengoendjoekan Poela Bali atawa Gids Bali (Guide to the island of Bali or Bali Guidebook)*, Malang: Paragon Press.
- 2 Soe Hok Gie, *Catatan Seorang Demontran*, Jakarta: LP3ES, 1983.
- 3 John Maxwell, *Soe Hok-Gie, Pergulatan Intelektual Muda Melawan Tirani*, Jakarta: Pustaka Utama Grafiti, 2001, based on John R. Maxwell, "Soe Hok-Gie: A Biography of a Young Indonesian Intellectual", unpublished PhD dissertation, The Australian National University, 1997.
- 4 Despite the newspaper headlines when he died, Arief Budiman was certainly not unrecognised in Indonesia. A tribute for his 77th birthday published in 2018 includes 26 contributions and runs to 267 pages: KH. Mustofa Bisri et al (ed), *Arief Budiman (Soe Hok Djinn) Melawan tanpa Kebencian*, Yogyakarta: New Merah Putih, 2018. Another tribute published posthumously has over 50 contributions and runs to 434 pages: Syaefudin Simon and Swary Utami Dewi (ed), *Idealisme dan Kearifan Arief Budiman*, Jakarta: Global Express Media, 2020.
- 5 This is an abridged version of the inaugural Arief Budiman Lecture delivered at the University of Melbourne on 28 September 2021 by Charles Coppel. The full lecture may be found at <https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/asia-institute/news-and-events/inaugural-arief-budiman-lecture>. John Maxwell made major contributions to the lecture and to the abridged version.

Arief Budiman, Chinese Indonesians, and Indonesian Studies at the University of Melbourne

Jemma Purdey

Arief Budiman arrived in Melbourne in the late 1990s, in the midst of something of a boom in Indonesian studies in Australian universities. Enrolments in Indonesian language at the University of Melbourne were reaching a near all-time high. The array of Indonesia-related subjects and researchers with an Indonesia interest – not only within the Faculty of Arts but across the university – offered students the opportunity for a rich and deep level of engagement with "Indonesia," then on the cusp of monumental change and democratic reform. When Arief arrived in 1997, I was completing my BA Hons year and making plans to undertake a dissertation under Charles Coppel's supervision. As historian Heather Sutherland remarked to me years later, the convergence of timing and interest is an especially crucial combination for scholars embarking upon their path of deep research.

I'd not yet met the new Foundation Professor of Indonesian Studies, but from my vantage point on the South Lawn, I immediately recognised Arief Budiman from the photos I'd seen in the newspapers and magazines I read every day in the basement of the nearby Baillieu Library. He was walking slowly along the yellow brick path running parallel to the reflection pool, dressed casually in a patterned shirt and sandals, gently swinging a calico bag over his shoulder. He struck a lonely figure, or was he simply in deep contemplation, or was it just a post-lunch haze?

In early 1998, as I turned my mind to a dissertation topic, Charles Coppel's attention was decidedly preoccupied with the fate of ethnic Chinese Indonesians, about whom he had written his own thesis and spent many years researching. As we sat down to consider my options, the Indonesian economy was in the grip of the Asian Financial Crisis, and Indonesian-language news agencies were reporting small but increasingly frequent



Fig. 1 (above): Book cover, *Reformasi: Crisis and Change in Indonesia*, edited by Arief Budiman, Barbara Hatley and Damien Kingsbury, Monash Asia Institute, 1999.

attacks on businesses owned by ethnic Chinese Indonesians. The government rhetoric was turning decidedly nationalistic. Sensing something far more profound was afoot than I could have imagined, Charles set the scene, and I began to see the possibilities for a merging of my interests in the politics of Indonesia and human rights. It was at this point that Charles suggested we immediately head upstairs to meet the new Professor of Indonesian Studies, Arief Budiman. He would, Charles suggested, make a very good advisor for such a research project. I recall that Arief's

response was enthusiastic and informative, but also deferential to Charles' knowledge on the subject of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese. I'm pretty sure I was not aware at that time that Arief was ethnic Chinese, nor did I know about his famous brother Soe Hok Gie, though I had heard of his protest against his former rector and his eventual dismissal from Universitas Satya Wacana.

The wave of anti-Chinese sentiment and violence in early 1998 erupted into rioting and mass violence across Jakarta and other cities by mid-May of that year, leading to the eventual fall of Soeharto's New Order government (1966–1998). Arief easily stepped into a role as media commentator and, luckily for us, he provided up-to-date analysis on the day-to-day machinations at play during this period of transition.¹ Our cohort of Indonesia-followers in Melbourne shared the sense of euphoria felt by the students and pro-democracy leaders on the streets of Jakarta, but also the devastation for the victims of the violence, including mostly ethnic Chinese but also the urban poor.

Together with Tiong Djin Siauw and others, Arief established the Committee Against Racism in Indonesia (CARI) to bring attention to the plight of the victims and to open conversations long taboo in Indonesia about underlying, systemic, and structural racism. In Melbourne in late 1998, CARI held a series of important community meetings and seminars with visiting speakers from

Cold War Tropes and Cultural Politics in Indonesia, 1950-65

Stephen Miller

Cold War anti-communism and the tropes that accompany it continue to be a part of Indonesian politics in the 21st century.¹ These tropes are not only part of public discourse in Indonesia, but also infuse discussions of Indonesian history, both inside and outside of the country. They dehumanise the victims of the political genocide of 1965-66 and also distort and obscure our view of the politics of the period between the recognition of Indonesian sovereignty and the emergence of the New Order regime under Major-General Suharto.

This was a time when different visions of the new republic's future were considered, debated, and struggled over, including an intense struggle in cultural arenas. It was also the period of the most intense Cold War competition between the "West" on one side and "Communism" (i.e., Stalinism) on the other. In Indonesia both sides of this struggle comprised broad and diverse fronts. Not only this, both sides, generally in complete sincerity, presented themselves as champions of "democracy" or "justice" against the "oppression" of their opponents (whether this was presented as an opposition to imperialism, or an opposition to Stalinism, amongst other possibilities).

In the context of the ongoing influence of Suharto's anti-communist regime and the collapse of the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, it has continued to be common to present one side of this conflict as naively representing a struggle for freedom in opposition to Russian-style authoritarianism. This essay is to counter any naive presentation of the role of the more liberal elements of the cultural anti-communism before 1965-66.²

Given what we now know about the cultural Cold War, and especially given the actual historical outcome of the wider political struggle in Indonesia – one of the bloodiest political genocides in history and the establishment of a regime clearly more authoritarian than its predecessor³ – this seems like an attitude that is not only unsustainable and arguably ethically problematic, it also distorts our understandings of key elements of Indonesian history. The events of 1965-66 and the regime that they instituted were a culmination of prior developments. Basically, the repression and bloodshed of 1965-66 did not fall from the sky.



Fig. 1: Members of the Lekra National Secretariat workshop in the early 1960s. Jane Luyte and Oey Hai Djoen, the key patrons of the secretariat are standing in the back row, second and third from left (Photo courtesy of Oey Hai Djoen).

While participants may have sincerely felt that they were fighting for "democracy," "freedom," or other just causes, it is clear that they were also part of manoeuvres that did not prioritise these ideals, and arguably led to authoritarian outcomes in Indonesia (and elsewhere). There is plenty of evidence for this. Charles Coppel recognises the key alignment of the Cultural Manifesto with the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF).⁴ The role of the army in developing and supporting the Manifesto was obvious to many contemporaries (for instance, in the army's material support for the pro-Manifesto All-Indonesia Writers' and Artists' Conference in 1964). The "conceptor" of the Manifesto has admitted that he worked covertly with the army intelligence during this period.⁵ In a 1993 paper responding to a liberal anti-communist, Sitor Situmorang, the leader of the radical nationalist Institute of National Culture in the 1960s, presented the period as one of diverse and competing poles of power, in which artists across the political spectrum, not least those who were Lekra-aligned, could and did suffer suppression before 1965.⁶

While we still need further research into anti-Left repression from 1950-1965, it is clear that there was regular repression throughout the period. This included jailing prominent figures, such as the novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer and the poet Agam Wispi. It is also clear that the success of the Left (e.g., cultural groups like Lekra and the women's organisation Gerwani), like that of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) itself, was the result of its ability to attract and organise members on a voluntary basis. The PKI was never a party of state, nor were any of its "fellow traveller" organisations (such as Lekra) state institutions. People joined freely

for a variety of reasons, but clearly among them was a belief that these organisations would contribute to the creation of a society with less inequality and more social justice. And it can be argued that in areas such as the arts, women's rights, and labour, such organisations did have at least some positive influence.

Cold War tropes not only misrepresent the politics of culture; they also tend to distort our view of the art works produced by artists and cultural workers sympathetic to the PKI. If, instead of seeing the cultural Left primarily as championing Stalinism, we understand it as a part of a popular movement, it becomes easier to see and understand key elements of cultural activity around Lekra. For example, it makes sense that critics should develop a vision for Indonesian cinema inspired by Italian neo-realism and progressive elements of classic Hollywood,⁷ rather than focusing on pat ideas of "Socialist Realism." The focus on the reportage literature of amateurs, rather than on sympathetic established authors like Pramoedya or Utuy Tatang Sontani,⁸ also makes sense if literature is seen as integrated with the building of a mass movement. Similarly, Lekra's enthusiastic and early engagement with popular arts, such as folk theatre and dance, is best understood as part of efforts to build grassroots political engagement.

This is not to say that many leading figures (and ordinary activists) did not hold and perpetuate illusions in the authoritarianisms of Stalinist countries. Rather, it is to say that there was not a monopoly of authoritarian politics on one side. The power of the PKI and other organisations, like Lekra, relied on their ability to attract voluntary support, and they never held any significant institutional

Indonesia, positioning the status of Indonesia's ethnic minorities, women, and other marginalised groups at the centre of academic and community discourse. In a rare example of such a focus in his own academic work, a few years later, Arief wrote a short chapter titled, "Portrait of the Chinese in Post-Soeharto Indonesia" for Charles Coppel's *Festschrift Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*.² In it he examines the proposition that 1998 had led to some positive changes in *pribumi* (native Indonesian) perceptions of the Chinese, who were slowly abandoning one-dimensional stereotypes. Likewise, he argues that there was a shift in the "self-perception" of the Chinese themselves, who now felt emboldened to emerge from their "cocoon," as Arief described it, and assume their rightful place as citizens. Nonetheless, after what he saw as the initial phase of "euphoria," Arief went on to observe that a "correction" was underway within a community wary of a backlash: "Chinese Indonesians are still trying to find their place in Indonesia, but now, within a still unstable society undergoing a slow transition towards democracy, this is not a simple process and its outcome cannot be predicted."³

A few months after the New Order collapsed, I distinctly recall huddling in and listening attentively to Arief's advice on the significant barriers still before a researcher embarking on investigations like those I was

planning – namely, to examine the position of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese and especially the recent violence ushering in the reform era. Despite the hopefulness of the early post-New Order mood in Indonesia, he advised me to keep a low profile and consult with only trusted sources, which included many of his own close contacts. As a fledgling fieldworker and outsider seriously nervous about tackling the task ahead, I clearly remember him conveying this rather frightening set of instructions with his characteristic smiles and giggles. A cool, calm approach to a problem he'd faced with courage so many times himself. It was a reassurance that I very much needed at the time, and one that I often remembered with appreciation throughout my time in the field. Not to mention the doors opened to me by the mere dropping of his name!

Arief's presence as a senior academic in Melbourne at this critical time in Indonesian history certainly played a large part in generating a high level of energy and dynamism within the wider Melbourne, and indeed Australian, Indonesianist academic community. At this time, Arief was at the centre of a renewal of connections across institutions, which led to a number of seminal events and collaborations, beginning with one of the earliest major conferences held after the fall of the New Order. Titled, *Democracy in Indonesia? The crisis and beyond*, the conference was held at the ABC's Southbank studios in Melbourne in December 1998, convened by Arief, Damien Kingsbury,

and Barbara Hatley from Monash University. The conference included speakers – both scholars and activists – from Australia and Indonesia, and the event resulted in the book *Reformasi: Crisis and Change in Indonesia* [Fig. 1].⁴ In his own chapter in the book, Arief's observation of this moment in Indonesia's history reflected his consistently optimistic outlook;

"Even though there are many uncertainties and difficulties facing Indonesia over the short term, it is not too unrealistic to hold an optimistic hope for the more distant future."⁵

In the early 2000s, the University of Melbourne's standing as a centre for Indonesian studies and related activity was also greatly enhanced by an influx of Indonesian students, largely due to the opportunities offered with the expansion of Australian and Indonesian government scholarship programs, but also significantly due to the pull of Arief himself. The energy, dedication, and deep knowledge of Indonesia available to those who were lucky enough to find ourselves in Melbourne at this time provided a rare opportunity then (and even rarer today) to immerse ourselves in and embark on deep study of Indonesia.

An emblematic figure in Indonesia, Arief represented an intellectual and social activism that fuelled many young adult Indonesians in this *reformasi* period, further enhanced

civilian or martial power (a fact underlined by the ease with which they were swept away by the emergent Suharto regime and its supporters). Presenting them as primarily authoritarian, therefore, misrepresents what these organisations meant to their members, misrepresents key features of anti-communism, misrepresents the struggles of the 1950-65 period, and, in the process, comes dangerously close to justifying the repression of 1965-66.

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Notes

- 1 Stephen Miller (2018). *Zombie Anti-Communism? Democratization and the Demons of Suharto-Era Politics in Contemporary Indonesia*. In Kate McGregor, Jess Melvin & Annie Pohlman. *The Indonesian Genocide of 1965: Causes, Dynamics and Legacies* (pp. 287-310). Palgrave Macmillan.
- 2 For an articulate elaboration of such an approach by a figure close to Budiman, see Goenawan Mohamad and Harry Aveling (ed. and trans.) (2011). *The 'Cultural Manifesto' Affair Revisited: Literature and Politics in Indonesia in the 1960s*, a signatory's view. Monash Asia Institute Press.
- 3 See Jess Melvin (2018). *The army and the Indonesian genocide: mechanics of mass murder*. Routledge; Kate McGregor, Jess Melvin & Annie Pohlman. *The Indonesian Genocide of 1965: Causes, Dynamics and Legacies* (pp. 287-310). Palgrave Macmillan; John Roosa (2020). *Buried histories: the anticommunist massacres of 1965-1966 in Indonesia*. The University of Wisconsin Press; amongst many others.
- 4 On CIA-backing for the CCF, see (amongst others) Frances Stonor Saunders (1999). *Who paid the piper?: the CIA and the cultural Cold War*. Granta.
- 5 See Keith Foulcher (1986). *Social commitment in literature and the arts: the Indonesian "Institute of People's Culture", 1950-1965*. Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, p. 125-126; Bodden, M. (2012). "Dynamics and tensions of LEKRA's modern national theater, 1959-65". In J. Lindsay and M. H. T. Liem (Eds.), *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian 1950-1965*. KITLV Press.
- 6 Keith Foulcher (1994). "The Manifesto is not dead": *Indonesian literary politics thirty years on*. Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University.
- 7 Stephen Miller (2015). *The communist imagination: a study of the cultural pages of Harijan Rakjat in the early 1950s*. PhD Thesis, University of New South Wales, Australia.
- 8 Foulcher (1986); Miller (2015).

when Ariel Heryanto arrived at the university a little while later. Arief initiated a series of Friday seminars on all manner of topics related to politics and society, which generated a dynamic and vibrant discourse between students and scholars, Indonesians and Australians, a spirit of exchange and inquiry that continues until today.

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Notes

- 1 <https://www.insideindonesia.org/friend-or-foe-2>
- 2 Lindsey, Tim and Helen Pausacker (eds.). 2005. *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*. Singapore: ISEAS.
- 3 Budiman, Arief. 2005. "Portrait of the Chinese in Post-Soeharto Indonesia." In *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*. Singapore: ISEAS, p. 101.
- 4 Budiman, Arief, Barbara Hatley, and Damien Kingsbury (eds.). 1999. *Reformasi: Crisis and Change in Indonesia*. Clayton, Australia: Monash Asia Institute.
- 5 Budiman, Arief. 1998. "The 1998 crisis: change and continuity in Indonesia", In *Reformasi: Crisis and change in Indonesia*, edited by Arief Budiman, Barbara Hatley and Damien Kingsbury, Clayton Vic., Monash Asia Institute: 57.