

MENGEMBALIKAN TIONGHOA KE DALAM HISTORIOGRAFI INDONESIA [RESTORING THE CHINESE TO INDONESIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY]

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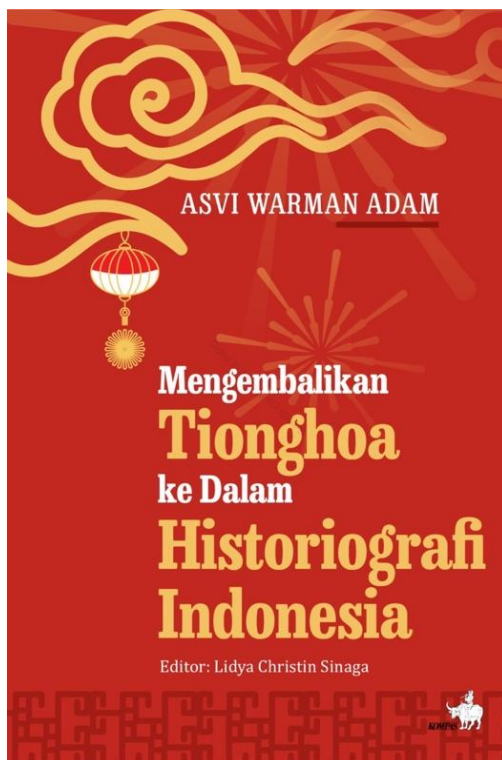
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BOOK REVIEW

**ASVI WARMAN ADAM, *MENGEMBALIKAN TIONGHOA KE DALAM HISTORIOGRAFI INDONESIA*,
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This book serves as a tribute to Asvi Warman Adam, who has retired as a research professor at the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN). He is widely recognized as a public historian active in both media and academic forums, known for his advocacy of what he calls the correction of history. Historian Adrian Vickers even described him as “Indonesia’s leading commentator on historical controversies.”

Born in Bukittinggi on 8 October 1954 to Adam Sutan Djamaris and Meimunah, Asvi grew up in an open-minded Muhammadiyah family that valued pluralism. His father enrolled him in Catholic schools, Fransiscus Elementary, Xaverius Junior High in Bukittinggi, and Don Bosco High School in Padang, believing Catholic teachers were more disciplined and that diversity should be embraced, especially during the politically indoctrinated atmosphere of the 1960s. As a young Minangkabau eager to explore the world, Asvi chose a field that allowed him to study

abroad.¹ He earned his bachelor's degree in French Literature from Gadjah Mada University (1977) and the University of Indonesia (1980). After working as a reporter for *Majalah Sportif* (1980-1983), he joined the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia/LIPI). In 1984, he taught Indonesian at INALCO in France and pursued further studies at EHESS under Prof. Denys Lombard, researching Dutch East Indies–Indochina relations (1870-1940).

Returning to Indonesia in 1990, he initially wrote on Vietnam and Cambodia before shifting his focus to Indonesian history in 1996, when he joined the Indonesian Historical Society (Masyarakat Sejarawan Indonesia/MSI). Asvi calls himself “an accidental historian,” having never intended to enter the field. Yet, encounters with victims of the New Order regime inspired him to pursue historical truth and justice, principles that set him apart from many of his predecessors.

The book *“Mengembalikan Tionghoa ke Dalam Historiografi Indonesia”* (Restoring the Chinese to Indonesian Historiography) is a work that seeks to re-examine the position of Chinese Indonesians within the national historical narrative. Edited by Didi Kwartanada, this book not only documents the intellectual journey of the historian Asvi Warman Adam, but also reflects the emergence of a new consciousness in Indonesian historiography, one that is more inclusive, diverse, and reflective of the nation's plural reality.

The book is divided into four main sections that include speeches, essays, and academic writings that were previously presented or published in different venues, seminars, newspapers, journals, and collective volumes. Altogether, this work represents an attempt to reaffirm that Chinese Indonesians are not “outsiders” to the nation's history, but rather an integral part of Indonesia's social, political, and cultural development. Through these collected writings, Asvi highlights how the national historiography, particularly under the New Order and even afterward, has left large silences that exclude or marginalize the Chinese. This book therefore becomes part of a broader intellectual project to rewrite Indonesian history in a more plural, just, and balanced manner.

In the introduction written by Didi Kwartanada,² readers are introduced to the context behind the making of this collection. Kwartanada explains that this book is not merely a compilation of writings about “Chinese in Indonesian history,” but rather a reflection on how Indonesian history itself has been written, and who gets to be included in its narrative. For decades, Indonesian historiography has been dominated by a homogenized nationalist perspective that privileges the “*pribumi*” or indigenous identity. Within this framework, the Chinese were often positioned as the Other, a group seen as peripheral to the nation's story. Kwartanada emphasizes the need to bring the Chinese back into the historiographical framework of Indonesia, not as foreign bodies, but as integral components of its social and cultural fabric. In other words, “returning the Chinese” does not mean simply adding new stories about them into existing historical texts, but rather transforming the very way we understand what counts as “Indonesian history.” It is a call to reimagine the national narrative as a shared construction shaped by many voices.

The first section of the book opens with Asvi Warman Adam's acceptance speech for the 2010 Nabil Award. In this reflective speech, Asvi traces his own

¹ Understanding the culture of migrating in Minangkabau society, see Mochtar Naim, *Merantau Pola Migrasi Suku Minangkabau* (Gajah Mada University Press, 1984).

² Didi Kwartanada (born in Yogyakarta, 3 February 1968) is an Indonesian historian focusing on the history and social life of Chinese Indonesians, particularly in Java. A graduate of UGM and NUS, he has worked with several research institutions, including Nabil Foundation.

intellectual journey, which, unlike most historians, did not begin in history but in French Literature. His early interest in Indochina, particularly Vietnam, introduced him to the broader dynamics of colonialism and decolonization in Southeast Asia. From there, he gradually turned his attention to Indonesia, where he became deeply concerned with the politics of historical writing. Asvi admits that his engagement with issues such as correcting Indonesia's history (*pelurusan Sejarah Indonesia*), the violence of 1965, and the marginalization of the Chinese was not part of a deliberate academic plan but rather a moral and intellectual response to the distortions he saw in official narratives. For him, much of Indonesian history has been simplified, sanitized, or manipulated to serve political power. Among these neglected areas, the story of the Chinese stood out as one of the most systematically marginalized.³

The following piece, written by Didik Kwartanada, discusses the role of the Nabil Foundation, a cultural institution that promotes the doctrine of Cross-Cultural Fertilization. The Foundation works to highlight the idea that Indonesian culture is not monolithic but rather the result of a long process of interaction and mutual exchange among various ethnic groups, including the Chinese. Through public dialogues, seminars, and publications, the Nabil Foundation has tried to create an intellectual and cultural space for alternative narratives about the Chinese in Indonesia. Its collaboration with Asvi Warman Adam exemplifies how academic work and cultural activism can come together to build a more open and inclusive understanding of Indonesian history.

Although not elaborated in great detail in the summary, the second section of the book plays a crucial role as it discusses one of the most influential aspects of historical consciousness: history education in schools. Asvi points out that the absence of Chinese Indonesians in history textbooks is not accidental, it is the result of a systematic policy, especially under the New Order regime. In the national curriculum, the contributions of the Chinese were often erased or disguised. Yet, their involvement in various fields, economy, education, journalism, arts, and even the struggle for independence, was undeniably significant. Asvi calls on educators and younger historians to revise the way history is taught, to make it more inclusive and representative. History should not only glorify the majority ethnic group but should also give voice to others who helped shape the nation. By bringing Chinese Indonesians into the classroom, students will learn that Indonesian identity is not exclusive; it is the product of long and complex interactions among diverse peoples.

The third section, presenting Asvi's concrete efforts to recover Chinese figures who have been forgotten in mainstream historiography. Through a series of essays, he reconstructs the lives and contributions of individuals whose names rarely appear in official history books. Among them is John Lie (Lie Tjeng Tjoan), a naval officer who played a role in smuggling logistical supplies for Indonesia's independence struggle between 1945 and 1949. John Lie is not only remembered as a national hero but also as proof that Chinese Indonesians were part of the revolutionary struggle for sovereignty. Another figure discussed is Ang Yoan Goan (AYG), founder of the newspaper *Sin Po*. This paper is historically important because it was the first to publish the lyrics of "Indonesia Raya", the national anthem, before independence. Through AYG's story, Asvi demonstrates how the Chinese press contributed ideologically to the formation of Indonesian nationalism.

³ See, Asvi Warman Adam, *Seabad Kontroversi Sejarah* (Ombak, 2007); Asvi Warman Adam, 'Beberapa Catatan Tentang Historiografi Gerakan 30 September 1965 [Quelques notes sur l'historiographie du Mouvement du 30 Septembre 1965]', *Archipel*, published online 2018, <https://doi.org/10.4000/archipel.604>; Asvi Warman Adam, *Melawan Lupa, Menepis Stigma Setelah Prahara 1965* (PT. Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2015); Asvi Warman Adam, *Membongkar Manipulasi Sejarah; Kontroversi Pelaku dan Peristiwa* (PT. Kompas Media Nusantara, 2009).

Asvi also sheds light on the achievements of athletes such as Maulwi Salwen (football) and Justian Suhandinata (badminton), representing the Chinese contribution to Indonesian sports. In academia, he highlights Melly G. Tan and Ong Hok Ham, two prominent Chinese-Indonesian intellectuals whose works in some levels have shaped the study of Indonesian society and history. In the political field, Siauw Giok Tjhan stands out as a figure in the 1950s who advocated for social justice and inter-ethnic integration. His political engagement represents a vision of citizenship that transcends ethnic boundaries.

One particularly interesting essay in this section is “Ketika Ahok Visited Medayu Agung” (April 2017). Despite its title, the piece is not primarily about the controversial political figure Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), but about Oei Hiem Hwie, the founder of Medayu Agung Library in Surabaya. The library holds valuable collections related to Soekarno, early manuscripts of Pramoedya Ananta Toer written in Buru Island, and archives on the Chinese in Indonesia. Through Oei’s story, Asvi illustrates how the preservation of historical memory often depends on individuals who quietly safeguard cultural heritage rather than on formal state institutions.

The fourth and final part presents three longer analytical essays that explore the structural aspects of the Chinese experience in Indonesia, focusing on state policy, violence, and identity. The first essay examines state policies toward the Chinese in Medan and Semarang. Asvi traces the trajectory of these policies from the colonial period to the post-Reformasi era. Under Dutch colonial rule, the Chinese often acted as intermediaries between the colonial administration and indigenous populations. In Java, they became part of the process of cultural hybridization. However, after independence, this dynamic shifted: where once the Dutch had served as the axis of acculturation between Javanese and Chinese, post-1945 it was the Javanese who occupied the central position. In East Sumatra, particularly in Deli, the 1905 Decentralization Law categorized non-native migrants, including the Chinese, as subjects of the Malay Sultanate and encouraged them to assimilate into the Malay community. Asvi documents these developments carefully, though he notes that further study is needed to understand how Chinese communities in Medan actually responded to such pressures.

The second essay turns to Singkawang and Tangerang, two regions often absent from mainstream narratives. In West Kalimantan, Asvi revisits the 1967 massacres, which are frequently misrepresented as purely ethnic conflicts. In reality, he argues, the violence was more deeply connected to the *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) between Indonesia and Malaysia, which escalated into horizontal conflicts involving the Dayak and Chinese communities. Asvi also discusses the 1946 killings of Chinese residents and explores how Chinese Indonesians have tried to participate in local politics despite deep-seated discrimination, in Tangerang. Through these case studies, Asvi exposes how violence and exclusion have shaped not only historical memory but also everyday life.

The final essay focuses on Chinese identity and the politics of name changing. Drawing on the arguments of Sunny Lie, Asvi explains that the widespread adoption of Indonesian names by Chinese families across four generations was not merely a personal or cultural choice, it reflected larger negotiations between identity, politics, and survival (p. 231).⁴ During the New Order, such name changes often became a means of navigating restrictive state policies and avoiding suspicion or persecution. The

⁴ See also, Sunny Lie and Benjamin Bailey, ‘The Power of Names in A Chinese Indonesia Family’s Negotiations of Politics, Culture, and Identities’, *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, 2016.

practice, therefore, reveals how individuals internalized and responded to national discourses of belonging and exclusion.

“*Mengembalikan Tionghoa ke Dalam Historiografi Indonesia*” stands as an important contribution to the rewriting of Indonesian history from a pluralistic perspective. Through his writings, Asvi Warman Adam challenges the conventional understanding of history as the story of a single dominant group. He invites readers to recognize that Indonesia’s national history was built through the interactions and struggles of many communities, including those that have long been marginalized.

Beyond its historical facts, the book also conveys a moral and political message: national reconciliation cannot be achieved without historical justice. Acknowledging the role and suffering of Chinese Indonesians is part of the broader process of healing the nation’s collective memory. Through the combined efforts of scholars like Asvi, Didi Kwartanada, and institutions such as the Nabil Foundation, we are reminded that history does not belong only to the victors. It also belongs to those whose voices were silenced and whose stories were erased. This book not only enriches our understanding of the Chinese in Indonesia but also expands the very framework of Indonesian historiography, making it more human, inclusive, and fair.

Summarising Asvi Warman Adam’s writings in “*Mengembalikan Tionghoa ke Dalam Historiografi Indonesia*” is not an easy task, as his works cover a wide range of themes. Thus, these writings are best viewed as an entry point or inspiration for readers to explore the topics Asvi pioneered more deeply. Throughout the book, repeated themes reflect Asvi’s consistency as a public intellectual. Readers will encounter discussions on Denys Lombard’s concept of the “nebula of Indonesian civilisation”, India, Arabia, China, and Europe, as well as the vital role of Chinese Indonesians in technological development. Though the repetition may seem redundant, it should be understood that these essays were originally written for different media over time, not as a continuous text. Hence, Asvi’s reiteration serves to refresh familiar readers’ memories while introducing new audiences to his ideas. Asvi’s passion for writing, which he described as “an extraordinary drive, as if I had received a mandate from the oppressed,” emerged despite his lack of personal ties to the 1965 tragedy. This moral energy sustained his prolific engagement with the media and public discourse.

Although the representation of Chinese Indonesians in national historiography remains limited, as Asvi frequently pointed out through his critiques of *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia* and *Indonesia dalam Arus Sejarah*, research on this subject has grown in recent years. Over the past decade, academic interest in this topic has expanded rapidly, as evidenced by the hundreds of studies that appear when searching the keywords Indonesian Tionghoa or Chinese on Google Scholar or Scopus database. The Works, for instances, by Zulfa Saumia,⁵ Yeri Wiryawan,⁶ and Erniwati⁷ illustrate new efforts to reconstruct Chinese-Indonesian experiences.

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⁵ Zulfa Saumia, ‘Orang Tionghoa, Perkebunan Gambir, Lada dan Kontestasi di Tanjungpinang Abad Ke-19’, *Paradigma: Jurnal Kajian Budaya*, 13.12 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.17510/paradigma.v13i2.1067>.

⁶ Yerry Wirawan, *Keberagaman Masyarakat Indonesia: Pengantar Sejarah dan Penelitian Masyarakat Tionghoa di Nusantara* (Sanata Dharma University Press, 2020).

⁷ Erniwati, ‘Everyday Life of the Chinese in Revolutionary Padang, 1945-1948’, in *Revolutionary Worlds: Local Perspectives and Dynamics during the Indonesian Independence War, 1945-1949*, ed. by Bambang Purwanto and others (Amsterdam University Press, 2023).

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