

Navigating a Sea of Resources

To Find Hidden Treasures



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The city hall is the most important building in Jember, it is the office of the regent of Jember Regency.
Photo courtesy of A. Irawan.

I was born in Jember, a rural town in East Java province, Indonesia. It is surrounded by cacao, coffee, rubber, and tobacco plantations, as well as a vast area of rice fields. Obviously economic development brings wind of change, but Jember is still a small town. When night falls, life shifts into the family room. The only part of the town that is still vibrant in the evening is the downtown area, which is dominated by a shopping mall and a square that often turns into a night bazaar. It is in this place that, I spent most of my childhood.

My childhood life revolved around the neighbourhood – where I played with my friends – and the school – where I spent the whole day. It did not leave me with a memory that I could cherish. However, I remember what my mother always told me: *“Ayo bersekolah dan belajar yang rajin agar maju.”* (“Go to school and study hard. By then you can get ahead.”) She was always successful in forcing my sister and me to go to school. Every morning, she would enter our room and say: *“Cepat bangun dan bersiap untuk ke sekolah.”* (“Hurry, get up, and be ready for school.”) Not a single day did she fail to

wake us, get us out of the bed, and ready us for the school day ahead. If we did not obey, she would not hesitate to beat us fervently.

At that time I did not understand why she was so “cruel” to us. It took me years to know that her “cruelty” reflected her appreciation of education, as well as her hope that her children could get an education as high as possible, the education that she could only dream of; as she was unable to get it because of financial constraints. She did not spare any efforts to provide a good education for her children. This inspired me to be successful in my education. Up till now, I am still a student. I am doing my doctorate degree in anthropology at Cornell University, New York. Perhaps because of the importance of education my mother inculcated in me, I always strived hard to get a scholarship to support my education. So far, lady luck has always

been on my side. That’s why, jokingly I am called “a professional student.”

As an Indonesian of Chinese descent, I have first-hand experience of the issues many minority groups face. The Chinese are an ethnic minority in Indonesia. Friction is often present between the Chinese and the non-Chinese. Ethnic relations are strained mostly because of racial prejudice. Because of this, during my schooling years, not only did I concentrate on my studies, I also joined a community outreach programme held by an organisation in Jember that, focused on the improvement of the relations between the Chinese and the non-Chinese. My involvement in this community outreach programme stimulates my academic interest in ethnic relation and ethnic identity. It is this interest that lands me in Singapore now. I am here to conduct research, which is funded by the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship of the National Library of Singapore.

Actually my encounter with the National Library started in 1998, when I was still a student at the National University

of Singapore (NUS). I often visited the old National Library whenever I needed books that I could not find at the NUS library and light reading materials. My frequent visits to the library introduced me to Singapore literature written in English. This kind of English literary work really interests me because of the familiarity of the social life, habits, customs, and cultures depicted in it. It is different from that of British or American literature, which at that time I found alien to me. Since then, literary works written by Catherine Lim, Goh Sin Tub, Colin Cheong and Kuo Pao Kun, among others, are on my reading list.

In my free time, I also like listening to many kinds of music, especially pop and jazz. I used to sing and listen to Indonesian and English songs only. However, my stay in Singapore, when I was a student at NUS, also gave me a chance to enjoy Cantonese and Mandarin songs. I did not speak Chinese back then. However, this did not prevent my Singaporean friends from asking me to join them for karaoke sessions during which most songs chosen were in Cantonese and Mandarin. Through karaoke, I picked up Mandarin. Now I can speak Mandarin a bit, but Cantonese and Hokkien are still tough for me. Nevertheless, my repertoire in pop music has expanded. In the karaoke lounge, I can sing in Indonesian, Malay, English, Mandarin, and sometimes Cantonese.



One of the icons of Jember is the water tower, which was built in 1930s, and is still in use now. Located in the central market of Jember, it is as high as a three-floor building. Photo courtesy of A. Irawan.

I enjoyed myself when I was a student in Singapore. Almost every year, I spend my holiday here. A few years ago, one of my relatives came to Singapore to pursue his postgraduate studies at NUS. Knowing this, suddenly I wanted to come here and stay longer than when I did for holiday. But I did not know how. However, my dream came true, when the National Library of Singapore granted me the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship Award. This award enables me to stay in Singapore for about six months to conduct research on a topic I am interested in – the Buddhist identities of Chinese Indonesians.

The Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship is also helping me to develop myself professionally. It enriches me as I gain a better understanding of the topic I am investigating through researching and studying the resources of the National Library of Singapore, especially the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library collection, which houses extensive resources

on Southeast Asia. The National Library is like a sea of resources. Those who navigate it find hidden treasure. And I believe, the hidden treasure in this library will help materialise my hope, that is, to contribute to the development of Southeast Asian studies, especially the study of the Chinese in Indonesia. ■



Mr Setefanus Suprajitno was awarded the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship for six months by Ms Ngian Lek Choh, Director, National Library at a signing ceremony held on 2nd March 2010.

Setefanus Suprajitno and Dr Phyllis Chew were each awarded the Lee Kong Chian Research Fellowship on 2nd March and 6th May 2010 respectively.

Suprajitno has an M.A. in Anthropology and his research topic focuses on “The Buddhist identities of the Chinese in Indonesia after Reformasi”.

Dr Chew has a Ph.D in Linguistics and her research topic is on “Multiculturalism in pre- and colonial Singapore: the sociolinguistics of early Singapore”.

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