An interview with Julian CH Lee

Julian CH Lee, Senior Lecturer in Global Studies at RMIT University, speaks to Christina Plant about his new edited volume Narratives of Globalization: Reflections on the Global Human Condition.

The book opens with three chapters that are introductory in nature. The general introduction is followed by an overview of the various paradigms regarding multiculturalism. Raihani argues for critical multiculturalism that emphasizes the representation of minority narratives, and critical reflections on dominant discourses of the majority groups. The next chapter deals with the history of education in Indonesia, particularly the longstanding disparity between state schools and madrasahs (Islamic day schools). Under decentralization regulations, general schools are funded by the regional government. This is not the case for madrasahs, which remain under the national government and tend to be underfunded. The chapter also discusses other recent changes, like school-based management, school-based curriculum, teacher certification programs and the introduction of international standard schools. For readers who are familiar with paradigms of multiculturalism as well as the history of education in Indonesia, these chapters could be skipped over. The next eight chapters contain the crux of his research. In each of them, Raihani explores the extent to which multiculturalism is nurtured in a particular element of education. With the exception of an analysis of the Education Law in chapter four and the concluding last chapter, the six other chapters contain observations and interviews with the principals, teachers, and students of six secondary schools in Yogyakarta and Palangkaraya. The types of schools vary: three state-owned schools (one general, one vocational, and one madrasah), two private schools (one is owned by Muhammadiyah, a large Islamic organization, and one is a Catholic school).

Diversity is the cornerstone of Indonesia’s national identity; it is proclaimed in the country’s motto, and celebrated on many occasions, from the obvious Youth Pledge Day to the unrelated Kartini Day. However, alarmingly, there have been few reflective discussions about what living in a plural society should entail. This book is relevant because it initiates this discussion by studying how education in Indonesia constructs or obstructs multicultural attitudes among its citizens, particularly with regard to cultural and religious diversity. Written by Raihani, currently a professor at the State Islamic University of Riau, this is a timely project.

Multicultural education in Indonesia

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It is like a marriage: when you are in touch and even after divorce, you keep influencing each other, albeit that the logic of it is screwed, unpredictable and rather surprising. If the book under review has a message, it is that contact between cultures results in a process of mutual influencing that shouldn't and can't be settled through picking simple labels to it, such as ‘localization’, ‘hybridization’, ‘creolization’, ‘Japanization’, or what have you. Influences are two-sided, influences live on and it is the dialectics of the contact that should be in focus. This insight directs the attention to minute details that cannot be meaningfully reduced to grand ideas and is amply illustrated by the exploits of some ten Japanese fieldworkers and two Hong-Kong Chinese anthropologists, resulting in the description and analysis of the “Dynamics of Culture in Interface”.

Niels Mulder

and one pesantren (Islamic boarding school). Through this strategy, Raihani obtains a sample that roughly represents the types of schools in Indonesia (secular-religious, state-private, general-vocational). Interestingly, despite the wide range of schools studied, there is significant difference between them with regard to multicultural education. As each subsequent chapter shows, the formation of multicultural attitudes is not a priority in the Indonesian education. One of the key issues is the neglect of multiculturalism in the national policy. The Education Law 2003 reflects the process of democratization in Indonesia. It mandates that every citizen has an equal right to education, and ensures greater involvement from the community. However, according to Raihani, the law does not contain articles on multicultural education. Multiculturalism is weakly implied in references to education as a human right, and the role of education in creating democratic citizens. A strategic implementation of the law, the Ministerial Decree of 23/2006 that outlines the expected outcome for primary and secondary education, shows that multicultural attitudes is not one of the competencies targeted by school subjects, with the exception of anthropology. Only anthropology provides a platform for discussions on tolerance and respect for cultural and religious diversity, but the course is only available for students in the low-prestage language stream. Without a clear mandate from the government, the extent to which multiculturalism is aspired to depends on individual school principals and teachers. In chapter five, Raihani shares his findings on leadership styles of the school principals and their policies. Although all the principals are aware of and appreciate diversity, they do not have clearly articulated strategies to cultivate multiculturalism. Some of the policies are outright contradictions to multiculturalism. Thus for instance, in the vocational state school, all Muslim female students are obliged to wear jilbab, in the general school owned by Muhmadan, all female students, including those who are not Muslims, have to wear jilbab, and in the general state school, the minority religions are not given dedicated rooms for their religion classes. Accusations of ethnic or religion-based favoritism have also been made towards principals, for instance, when sending teachers to professional development programs.

The practices related to the teaching of the subject ‘Religion’ are discussed further in chapter six. Despite the potential of the subject to build mutual understanding among people of different religions, Raihani finds that the confessional framework does not fully accommodate this. The confessional approach of religious teaching emphasizes truth claims and doctrines. There is little room for new and contextual interpretation, let alone comparative discussions with other religions. Here too, very much depends on the teachers’ initiatives. While some teachers engage in a comparative approach, many are reluctant to do so.

In chapters seven and eight, Raihani focuses on the students and their points of view. Based on interviews and observations of extra-curricular activities, Raihani argues that one of the unintended consequences of these activities is the interaction with fellow students from different religious or ethnic backgrounds. Although this is undoubtedly positive, the fact that it is unintended, once again, highlights the lack of systematic cultivation of multicultural ideas in the students’ learning activities. In the subsequent chapter, Raihani presents the results of his focus group discussion with students regarding their ideal community. Most students are in favor of diversity, although a small number of students would rather live in a homogeneous society. In terms of personal relationships, interreligious marriages are more acceptable than inter-religious marriages. Differences between religions are perceived to be more unmanageable. Given the confessional approach in religious teaching, this stance is unsurprising.

In chapters nine and ten, Raihani ventures to other types of inequality in the school setting. Thus in chapter nine, he discusses injustices based on economic class, and the discrimination against students that do not take the natural science stream. Chapter ten looks closer into an Islamic boarding school (pesantren) and shows that the hierarchies are based on economic class as well as family lineage, the latter giving a higher status to offspring from religious leaders. In comparison to the discussion of multicultural attitudes in relation to ethnic and religious diversity that are found in these two chapters, the discussions in these two chapters are too cursory, and lack clear connection with the other chapters. The issues explored in these two chapters might be better served if they are presented as separate studies.

Overall, the book shows that the education system does not aim to transform Indonesians into multicultural citizens. This alone should be a warning for the future of the nation. Based on Raihani’s study, there is a great possibility that the next cohort of leaders will consist of people who are not critical of systemic inequalities and majoritarian discourses. Therefore, this book should not only be of great interest to scholars in Indonesian studies, but also to educators and policy makers in Indonesia.

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References


Niels Mulder (1935; Dutch) has devoted most of his professional life to research on the mental world of members of the urban middle classes on Java, in Thailand and the Philippines. His latest work is Life in the Philippines: Contextual Essays on Filipino Being (forthcoming with University of the Philippines Press).

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