Review:

Bicultural leader Siauw Giok Tjhan

Saskia E Wieringa

For engineer-turned-political scientist Siauw Tion Djin there was no better subject for his PhD thesis than to analyse the political career of his renowned father, Siauw Giok Tjhan.

Fortunately that thesis has now been turned into a full length biography in which we learn the trajectory of his father's efforts to fight for the interests of people of Chinese descent who lived in Indonesia and for Indonesian nationalism in general. The precarious position of the biographer has been well understood, the result being that the political analysis is fair, while the readers profit from the intimate knowledge the son acquired about his father. When father Siauw was imprisoned in Suharto's gulag, the son visited him and had occasion to question him extensively about his political aspirations and trajectory.

Siauw Giok Tjhan (1914-1981) lived through the turbulent years of the end of Dutch colonialism, the Japanese occupation and independence. He helped shape Indonesia's trajectory, convinced that only the recognition of the diversity of the people of this archipelago could bring stability and peace. He firmly believed in the integrationist approach for Chinese Indonesians in Indonesian society, whether they were peranakan or totok Chinese. The totok Chinese generally spoke a Chinese language and adhered to its culture, while peranakan Chinese were more integrated into Indonesia.

Siauw's organisational talents were recognised early on. He entered politics soon after independence was declared, while also playing an important role as a journalist. He firmly believed that Sukarno's dream of a socialist Indonesia with prosperity for all
would be best for Chinese Indonesian people as well. As a member of parliament until
1965 he defended the interests of the largest organisation of Chinese Indonesians,
Baperki (Consultative Body of Indonesian Citizenship), which he co-founded. Education
and citizenship were major issues in this association.

During the tumultuous last years of Sukarno’s presidency, Baperki strongly supported
Sukarno’s policies, including his backing of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI).
When the PKI was annihilated by Suharto’s military after the murder of six generals in
the early morning of 1 October 1965, Baperki came under attack as well. Its offices and
schools were confiscated or destroyed, its university burned. Siauw Giok Tjhan and
other Baperki leaders were imprisoned without trial – as indeed there was nothing they
could be tried for. In the massacres that accompanied the coming to power of General
Suharto many Chinese were also murdered – whether as members of Baperki or because
of racist motives. Under the New Order military dictatorship expressions of Chinese
culture were suppressed.

In the last chapters the author reflects on the question of whether his father may
have carried guilt for the fate of Baperki. Such is the power of the New Order
propaganda, that its victims and survivors have long felt they are to be blamed. When I
did research on Gerwani, the Indonesian women’s organisation associated with the PKI,
some of the senior leaders also agonised over this question. Could they be held
responsible for the fate of the many young women who were sexually tortured and
murdered? No, of course not. The murderers and rapists who committed these crimes
must be held responsible and particularly their leaders who incited them to murder.

This book is a major contribution to the history of the Chinese Indonesians, and their
most important organisation, Baperki. It also gives a fascinating picture of a crucial
period in Indonesian history, from 1945 until 1965. To look at Indonesian modern
history through the eyes of a person both deeply involved in those politics yet aloof
from it, is an enriching experience.

Siauw Tiong Djin. Siauw Giok Tjhan: Bicultural Leader in Emerging Indonesia. Clayton,

http://www.publishing.monash.edu/books/sgt-9781925523362.html

Saskia E Wieringa (sewieringa@xs4all.nl) is the chair of Gender and Women’s
Same-sex Relations Crossculturally, University of Amsterdam. She has published widely
on sexual politics in Indonesia, women’s empowerment and women’s same-sex relations
globally. Her books include the landmark Sexual Politics in Indonesia (Palgrave
Macmillan, 2002). She is chair of the Foundation International People’s Tribunal (IPT) 1965.