

## **Fighting prejudice against Indonesia's ethnic Chinese, museum uses literature to show their role in country's history**

Set up by a Muslim former student activist, the Chinese Indonesian Literature Museum fills an information gap in the history of ethnic Chinese people in Indonesia with its treasure trove of books, newspapers and other documents

PUBLISHED : Thursday, 15 March, 2018, 8:48am

UPDATED : Thursday, 15 March, 2018, 12:03pm

<http://www.scmp.com/culture/article/2137173/fighting-prejudice-against-indonesias-ethnic-chinese-museum-uses-literature>



### Randy Mulyanto

In May 1998, pro-democracy activist Azmi Abubakar joined thousands of other university students in a blockade of the Serpong area, situated just to the west of Indonesia's capital city, Jakarta.

Their mission was to prevent looting during riots sparked by food shortages and high unemployment, amid protests demanding the resignation of Indonesian president Suharto after more than three decades in power.

The riots had a profound effect on Azmi, a Jakarta-born Acehnese Muslim and father of four. He was living in Serpong, which is today part of South Tangerang city. The area has a large ethnic Chinese population, and Chinese Indonesian homes and businesses had become the target of looters.

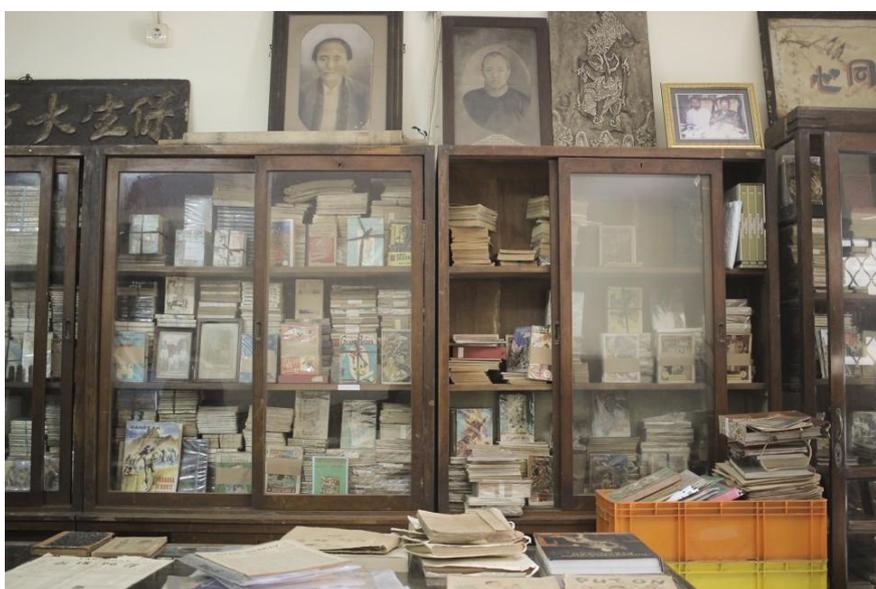
### The dogs fighting wild boars in illegal pits in Indonesia

The events concerned Azmi, but also sparked in him an interest in the history of the Chinese in the country. He began to collect all manner of related written materials pertaining to the Chinese community.

Fourteen years later, in 2012, he established the Museum Pustaka Peranakan Tionghoa (Chinese Indonesian Literature Museum), which he runs with other former student activists.

Located in a two-storey shophouse on South Tangerang's Golden Road complex, the museum is a treasure trove of more than 30,000 books, newspapers, comics and other documents.

Its book collection spans genres ranging from politics and sport to cuisine, wuxia - martial arts fiction - and medical texts. The museum's oldest exhibit dates back to 1891.



More than 5,000 of the museum's items belonged to John Lie Tjeng Tjoan (1911-88), Indonesia's only national hero of Chinese descent. Lie smuggled weapons into Indonesia and exported raw rubber during the revolution against Dutch rule from 1945 to 1949.



The documents include Lie's love letters and his correspondences with Indonesian officials.

Above a display case on the ground floor of the museum are copies of the *Sin Po* newspaper, including an edition from as far back as June 23, 1941.

Founded by Chinese Indonesians in 1910, the Malay-language *Sin Po* published a newspaper and a magazine. The *Sin Po* magazine used the term "Indonesia" as a title for one of its sections even before independence was declared in 1945.

*Sin Po* also published the composition of Indonesia's national anthem, *Indonesia Raya*, before it was ever performed publicly. Wage Rudolf Supratman, the anthem's composer, was a journalist working at the publication, which closed down in October 1965.

Although Azmi has been building his collection for almost two decades, it is constantly expanding as his contacts - including sellers of second-hand goods - alert him to new-found material.



Azmi, a businessman, says the museum is self-funded, and he flatly rejects offers of financial aid from both the government and the Chinese community.

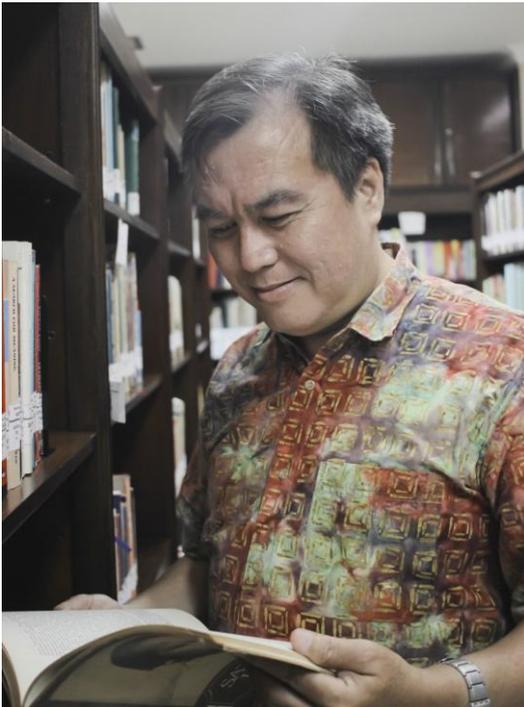
"We missed the train to deliver the information," Azmi says, referring to lost opportunities for the country to understand the role that ethnic Chinese have played in Indonesia's history.

Discrimination against the Chinese, he believes, is not borne of hatred but a lack of knowledge, and he established the museum to educate non-Chinese visitors. "If people don't understand the Chinese, it will result in suspicion."

Many Chinese Indonesians also drop by, hoping to learn something about the past. Azmi says that this is because a lot of Chinese Indonesians have an identity crisis. "When he or she isn't familiar with Chinese cultural customs, what is his or her background?" he says.

Suharto ruled in the cold war era - anything related to China, including Chinese overseas, was considered a 'fifth column' [communist sympathiser]





Suharto's New Order government, rather than take a multicultural approach to the country's ethnic Chinese population, adopted a policy of assimilation, forcing Chinese residents to change their names to Indonesian-sounding ones. Three main pillars of Chinese culture were banned: Chinese-language press, Chinese secondary schools and Chinese ethnic organisations.

In the museum's possession is a copy of a government annual report compiled by special staff from the ethnic Chinese affairs department that is dated 1968 - a year after Suharto rose to power.

The document classifies Chinese Indonesians based on their origins, skills and dialect groups such as Hokkien and Teochew. It goes on to state that there exists great rivalry between the different groups. However, if faced with a non-Chinese "enemy", they would unite and work together. Such statements fed existing prejudices against ethnic Chinese in Indonesian society.

"This [document] largely contributed to the creation of the disharmony we see [in Indonesia] today," Azmi says.

The museum also has a number of Chinese business nameplates. One bears the name Tan Lian Tjhoen, but on the reverse is another name - Djoenaedy K - a reminder of the official name-change policy. Other, much older, nameplates bear Chinese characters.



"Suharto ruled in the cold war era - anything related to China, including Chinese overseas, was considered a 'fifth column'," explains Didi Kwartanada, an independent scholar, using a term that was applied to communist sympathisers.

Didi, who has studied the Chinese in Indonesia's major island of Java, says there is generally stronger anti-Chinese sentiment on the islands of Java and Sumatra, compared to other regions of the country.

One of the earliest and largest anti-Chinese incidents occurred in the country during the Diponegoro war between 1825 and 1830 that pitted Javanese natives against the Dutch colonial authorities. The Chinese became targets in the conflict because the Dutch had given them the right to collect tolls and other taxes, putting them in a position of relative privilege.

According to Azmi, the perception of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia has been slow to change because it has largely been left to the Chinese themselves to tell the story of their contributions to the country - and that could come across as arrogant. Azmi says it is more effective if the message comes from people like himself.



Didi notes that the anti-Chinese sentiment has intensified sporadically since the beginning of the 20th century. He adds that it has always been part and parcel of regime change in Indonesia.

Thung Ju Lan is an academic at the Research Centre for Society and Culture at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences. Referring to how Chinese Indonesians are discriminated against, she explains that there are generalisations made between "those who have already blended in and those who have not".

### [Ethnic Chinese and want to live in China? Find out if you qualify for new five-year visa](#)

When there is talk about something positive in the Chinese community, for example, it is always about Chinese who have assimilated, she says. Those who have not assimilated are regarded negatively.



"What is not understood is that ... assimilation is a process. It can't be forced," Thung says. The process, she explains, takes time and begins with contact and interaction, before moving to accommodation, integration, acculturation and ending with assimilation.

For the Chinese who arrived in Indonesia in the 1930s and '40s, it has taken two to three generations for them to assimilate, Thung says. Others who "became Indonesians quickly" were those whose family members had been in the country since before the 1900s.

"We can't deny Chinese culture," Azmi says, adding that the Chinese have contributed much to the nation. He cites soft culture examples such as mie aceh (Aceh noodles) in Aceh province, the Chinese influence in Balinese architecture, and individuals such as Guangdong-born Tjong A Fie, who helped fund the construction of the landmark Maimun Palace in Medan.



According to Didi, the contributions made by Chinese Indonesians have been overlooked or obscured more often than not. The late French historian Denys Lombard identified four cultures that are assimilated into an Indonesian identity: Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian. Then there are the Chinese, who were responsible for the introducing basic technologies for farming, mining and fisheries.

Azmi says he has acquired a larger home for the Museum Pustaka Peranakan Tionghoa close by the existing location. There he hopes to feature dioramas to portray events such as the arrival of the Chinese in the country in the 14th century, and the Chinese and Javanese who fought together against the Dutch.

## The Chinese Indonesians with long memories and escape plans in case racial violence flares again - despite signs of tensions easing

He believes the museum has had a positive effect, and hopes it can make an even greater contribution to national unity in the future.

"Lingering discrimination that is experienced by Chinese Indonesians is our shared responsibility," he says. "Indonesia will be great if this problem is resolved."