

Karen Strassler, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (Durham and London: Duke University press, 2010). 375 pp. ISBN 9780822345930

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Volume 2, Issue 2: *Women's Camera Work: Asia*, Spring 2012

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0002.211> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0002.211>]

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Reading Karen Strassler's *Refracted Visions* is a journey to trace how "Indonesia" is imagined, questioned, and remade not through the main routes of nationalism—the official images and narratives produced by the state, whose investment in visual culture was especially lavish during the New Order period (1965–1998)—but rather through the roads taken by amateur photographers, owners of photo studios, student demonstrators, or ordinary Javanese women such as Ibu (Ms.) Soekilah, whose personal story opens the introduction of the book. Ibu Soekilah becomes a character whose "intimate artifacts" (3)—her photographs—appear in different chapters of the book and conflate with other visions of the nation.

Covering the span from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the crucial moment following the 1998 resignation of Suharto as Strassler began her PhD. field work in Indonesia, the book is structured around six genres of popular photography that oscillate between the personal and the public—amateur photography, studio portraiture, identity photographs, family ritual photography, student photographs of demonstrations, and photographs of charismatic political figures through which Strassler examines multiple and contradictory visions of national modernity. The book's generous illustrations (127 photographs in color) delineate the power of the visual in mediating the nation and the national subjects while, at the same time, serving as a constant reminder of the elusive: the presence elsewhere that photographic frames could not contain.

Strassler's rich and subtle work further contributes to the studies of nation and nationalism by unfolding the ironies and ambivalence in which diasporic subjects, in this case the ethnic Chinese, not only have played the role as "cosmopolitan brokers of the global capitalist modernity" (14) but also have shaped and disseminated ideas of nationhood. By giving prominence to the association between the history of photography in Indonesia and the ethnic Chinese who popularized photographic practices and ideas, Strassler emphasizes her argument on the entwining and the tension of "nation" and "modernity." Photography and the ethnic Chinese are characterized with a "structural ambivalence" (13) that constitutes national modernity: they are both formative elements of nationhood and markers of foreignness. Visions of the nation here are not cohesive; they remain, in Strassler's own word, "refracted."

The first and the second chapters of the book explicate the important roles of Chinese photographers as cultural producers and mediators in the making of images of the nation. The first chapter focuses on how amateur photographers in the late colonial period, who were mostly upper-middle-class Chinese Indonesians living in urban areas, contributed to the discourse of an "authentic Indonesia" through images of people and places in the idyllic tropical Indies which, ironically, exclude them from the frame. These romantic images not only endured until the postcolonial time but also largely influenced national imageries endorsed by the state, especially in the New Order regime under Suharto.

The second chapter looks at how the ideas of “Indonesia” were influenced by the ways in which Chinese studio photographers appropriated (or, in Strassler’s word, “translated”) images that circulated globally for Indonesian consumers.

In this genre, studio photographers created spaces for people to articulate their cosmopolitan desires and experiment with identities that transgress spatial boundaries. Aspirations for “unrealized ‘elsewheres’” (122) also tell us much about boundaries within the nation, as illustrated by an image showing the daughter of an ethnic Chinese photographer who posed as an ethnic Indonesian student activist in the demonstration against Suharto in which she could not otherwise participate because her parents were worried about her safety as a Chinese woman.

The ideological framework of state authorities that positions photography as documentation is reproduced and challenged by the popular practices of making, archiving, and circulating photographs. In chapter 3, we learn that identity photographs associated with legitimate identities are appropriated for personal use to create new spaces of social relations. Chapter 4 discusses how the practice of documentation finds new meanings and trajectories when it comes to family rituals such as weddings and funerals. Strassler shows that, contrary to some opinions expressed about the lack of “documentation awareness” (*kesadaran dokumentasi*) (16) in Indonesia, individuals and families were very much invested in documenting their lives. By analyzing photographs of family histories, Strassler reveals an encounter, fraught with tension, between the modern practice of archiving with other practices associated with traditional “Javanese’ ways of being” (21).

“Witnessing history” serves as a vital keyphrase for chapters 5 and 6, in which Strassler demonstrates how people’s contacts with major political events manifest themselves in different practices of personal documentation. Chapter 5 focuses on the production and consumption of photographs of the *reformasi* (the 1998 political reform) demonstrations by students, who viewed these practices as both signs of political transparency and as mementos of their participation in national history. Strassler puts herself as a witness to this turbulent time through vivid ethnographic details. In fact, the book is dedicated to her photographer-activist friend, Agus Muliawan, who was killed in 1999 while documenting the upheavals in East Timor. In Chapter 6, the term “witnessing” is complicated by the practice of posing an alternative version of history. Here Strassler explores the notion of counterhistory through one man who, in a rather eccentric way, incorporates messianic visions within the corridor of national historiography.

Situated within scholarly works on Indonesia, Strassler’s research complements a body of work that highlights the crucial roles of ethnic Chinese in the formation of early nationalism and enriches earlier studies by emphasizing the visual dimension, which has not been thoroughly explored, and drawing a continuity to the postcolonial context. The book presents us with a visual paradox in which Strassler argues on the one hand that “any understanding of postcolonial Indonesian national modernity must include ethnic Chinese within its frame” (14) and, on the other, a haunting question posed by one ethnic Chinese photographer: “How could a Chinese face represent Indonesia?” (66).

By stressing the ambivalence of ethnic Chinese photographic practices, Strassler delves into a fissure in the history of Indonesian visual culture in which the roles of Chinese cultural producers tend to be represented in a partial view. It would be fruitful to read the book in dialogue with Salim Said’s *Shadows on the Silver Screen* (Jakarta: Lontar Foundation, 1991), one of the few books on Indonesian cinema, which discusses the roles of Chinese film-makers and producers in Indonesia. Said, who wrote in the 1970s and was part of the film circle elites, expresses the concern of his time for the absence of “the real face of Indonesia” from the cinematic screen (3–4). While the notion of the “real” here departs from the state discourse on authenticity, Said offers a troublesome view shared among artists and critics of his generation that ties the absence of the “real Indonesia” in cinema to the origin of the film medium as a commodity produced and consumed by the ethnic Chinese, who mastered the technology yet remained foreign to Indonesian culture. Said does not explore the

realm of “national imaginary” in which ethnic Chinese cosmopolitanism and Indonesian-ness are intertwined. Strassler’s book triggers a re-examination of film history. On the other hand, by bringing Said’s study into Strassler’s research, we could ask how the practices of Chinese photographers are situated within the larger cultural field. While Strassler has indicated that different photographic genres influenced one another and even further connected photography to video practices in the case of family rituals, future works could explore how photography engages with and reconfigures other cultural practices, such as film and video, both of which have quite distinctive histories of their own—and vice versa.

Finally, we are reminded to question what has changed (and what remains) following the Indonesian political reform in 1998. As Strassler has also suggested, there has been a swift transformation, since her PhD. field work, in the political, social, and cultural landscape of Indonesia, coupled with the rapid and euphoric circulation of images through new media and digital technology. The burgeoning of independent groups and communities in the late 1990s, mostly initiated by young people in urban areas, has reshaped the visual landscape in profound ways. In the case of photography, for example, the photographer collective Mes 56 has attempted to respond to pre-existing genre conventions such as documentary or salon photography. More importantly, such groups and communities have fostered new ways of thinking about “the culture of documentation” that Strassler has extensively elaborated.

Strassler’s book allows us to depart from the official history through personal *dokumentasi* (documentation) which, while often echoing the bureaucratic logics of the state, offers personalized visions of the nation that are far from homogeneous. A decade after the 1998 political reform, “the culture of documentation” has manifested into a kind of “archive fever” in the cultural field. Various groups, without support from the state, have emphasized the importance of making archives accessible to the public by establishing private libraries, whereas others have developed programs to teach communities to record their daily lives through visual media, especially video. In the new era of “reform” and transparency, these groups advocate the spirit of democratic cultural practices: anyone can be an archivist. This ironically coexists, particularly in recent years, with the idiosyncratic archival practices of the modern Indonesian state. While the current government is preoccupied with the effort of creating new laws such as the Pornography Law and the ITE [Information and Electronic Transactions] Law to regulate the circulation and the preservation of visual images in the digital age, citizens protest against the lack of government support for abandoned archives, such as that of the HB Jassin Literature Documentation Center and the Sinematek film archive. Contemporary citizen practices of “dokumentasi” are haunted by anxieties and distrust over the competence of the state to determine what needs to be documented.

This book will provide solid ground on which to start a discussion on the shifting relations between the state and the citizen, and to extend into the new contexts the question that Strassler reiterates in her epilogue: “What does it mean to be Indonesian?”

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