From Sensation to Oblivion: Boven Digoel in Sino-Malay Novels

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Abstract

The so-called ‘Sino-Malay literature’ has often been characterized as literary publications that were commercial and very rarely political. This essay however draws attention to three novels written by prominent Indies Chinese authors on the colonial internment camp for communist activists, Boven Digoel. Written in three different decades, Kwee Tek Hoay’s Drama di Boven Digoel (Drama in Boven Digoel, 1928-1932), Liem Khing Hoo’s Merah (Red, 1937), and Njoo Cheong Seng’s Taufan gila (Mad typhoon, 1950) reflect not only individual journeys of Digoel-bound activists, but also the political landscapes in which they were written.

Keywords

Sino-Malay literature, Boven Digoel, Kwee Tek Hoay, Liem Khing Hoo, Njoo Cheong Seng

The literary works written in Malay by the Chinese of colonial Indonesia, the so-called Sino-Malay literature, have been characterized as shoddy romance stories produced for the purpose of making profit (Bureau voor de Volkslectuur 1930). Such a characterization of this literature, though obviously prejudiced, is more fitting for the works published up until the first quarter of the twentieth century. From the middle of the 1920s however, the literature became quite diverse in terms of genre and thematic representations—from highly imaginative fantasy stories, detective and crime fiction, ethnographic novels, sociological novels, to novels on

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1 I am especially grateful to Claudine Salmon, Yamamoto Nobuto, and Bijdragen’s editors and anonymous reviewers for the comments on earlier drafts of this essay. Any remaining errors are however my own.
political activism. This article draws attention to three novels written by three prominent Indies Chinese authors on the colonial internment camp for communist activists, Boven Digoel. Written in three different decades, Kwee Tek Hoay’s *Drama di Boven Digoel* (Drama in Boven Digoel, 1928-1932), Liem Khing Hoo’s *Merah* (Red, 1937), and Njoo Cheong Seng’s *Taufan gila* (Mad typhoon, 1950) follow individual journeys of political activists—real and fictional—to the place of exile in the malaria-infested jungle on the island of New Guinea.

With the exception of Kwee’s *Drama*, Chinese authors generally do not figure in discussions concerning literature on Digoel. A compilation of literary and journalistic writings on Digoel, *Cerita dari Digul* (Stories from Digoel, 2001), edited by Indonesia’s most acclaimed author, the late Pramoedya Ananta Toer, makes no reference to the novels by Liem and Njoo, both major authors of the Netherlands Indies period. My examination of their novels *Merah* and *Taufan gila* reveals not only distinctive takes on Digoel, but also a profound commitment to communist aspirations and to faithful representations of the internees’ experience. The existence of these novels and their varied perspectives on political activism compel one to ask: what exactly had motivated their creation? What do their variations (and similarities) tell us? And what can we infer about the place of ethnic Chinese authors in the (re)construction of Indonesian history?

My investigation of socialist-themed novels written by Indies Chinese authors began after stumbling upon two unusually profound novels by Njoo Cheong Seng, the most prolific of this group, published in 1950: *Taufan gila*, featuring a real-life Makassarese communist activist and his internment in Boven Digoel between 1927 and 1932, and *Manusia sampurna jang tidak sampurna* (The flawed flawless man), which interrogates the problem of class through the life story of Ho Eng-djie, a communist-leaning Chinese poet of Makassar. In both novels, the communist slogan ‘sama rasa, sama...

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2 Another prominent Chinese author, Pouw Kioe An, wrote *Api jang tida bisa dibikin padem* (Fire that cannot be quenched, 1939), in which the protagonists are framed and end up in Boven Digoel. The novel however has little to say about either Digoel or the communist movement—other than that the communists are mostly criminals—and can hardly be categorized as a Digoel literature. The ‘fire’ that is alluded to in the title is not at all political, but refers to the female protagonist’s undying love for the wicked man who tricks her into giving cover for a communist. The reference to Digoel and the communists comes very late in the story.
rata’ (solidarity, equality), popularized by one of the pioneers of the Indonesian communist movement, Marco Kartodikromo (1918), recurs. These novels are curiously uncharacteristic as Indies Chinese authors, despite their proven creativity and innovation in Malay literature, were not particularly known for their political activism, much less for proletarian inclinations.\(^3\) Many of them descended from the early immigrants of the merchant and artisan class (*huashang*) in Java, as opposed to the later immigrants of coolie labour (*huagong*) in Sumatra (Wang 1992:3-21).\(^4\) In fact, in Java, ethnic Chinese were normally identified as merchants and moneylenders, thus adversaries of the Communist Party proletarian base (McVey 1965:224-5).\(^5\) Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI, Communist Party of Indonesia) did not have notable Chinese constituents; among the 1300-odd activists interned in Digoel in the late 1920s, only 10 were Chinese (Salim 1977:32). Thus it is only expected that proletarian literary works, that is, writings devoted to the exposition of workers and their experience in industrial society, are few and far in between the large corpus of Sino-Malay literature.\(^6\)

\(^3\) The Chinese population in general was not interested in Indies politics in so far as it did not concern them. A segment of this population followed instead the politics in China or in later years supported Kuomintang as opposed to its communist rival; see McVey 1965. In literature, there was no association of leftist writers in the Indies as in Japanese colonies such as Korea and Taiwan in the 1920s and the 1930s.

\(^4\) Their extended genealogy in Indonesia means that most of these writers were *peranakan* (creolized, literally mixed descent) as opposed to *totok* (full-blooded) Chinese, which thus explains their linguistic preference for Malay rather than Chinese.

\(^5\) In this regard, the Chinese in the Indies differed from those in British Malaya who played a significant role in the spread of communism there. The communist movement in Malaya, in addition to ties with communist refugees from the Netherlands Indies, was also influenced by the Communist Party of China; see Cheah 1992:50-1. In the Indies, such ties with China were largely absent.

\(^6\) A good number of Sino-Malay novels are set in plantations, but they generally do not concern the plantation workers, nor do they address socio-economic issues. The focus is often on mill owners and their families, not workers. For instance, Wong Ah Jin’s *Aer mawar toempah* (Rose water spills, 1931) and Bong Hok Sioe’s *Lelie berdoeri* (Thorny lilly, 1932) touch upon (and criticize) the capitalist mindset that reveres wealth and prestige over moral integrity, but leave out the process of production in mills and plantations that makes material wealth possible. There are a greater number of novels on prostitutes, but they tend to be voyeuristic rather than introspective of the way industrialization in the Indies spurred prostitution; the most exemplary of these is the anonymously published *Kota Medan penoe den- gen impian, atawa Njai tertaboer dengen mas* (1924). A 2003 edition by Marcus A.S. and Pax Benedanto refers to ‘Juvenile Kuo’, one of Kwee Seng Tjoan’s pseudonyms, as the author.
This paucity makes the proletarian-themed novels by Liem Khing Hoo and Njoo Cheong Seng all the more extraordinary. From the colonial period only a handful of such novels have come to light, for instance, Semaoen’s *Hikajat Kadiroen* (The story of Kadiroen, 1920) and Soemantri’s *Rasa merdika* (The taste of freedom, 1924), both penned by prominent communist leaders on the exploitation of peasants in the Indies. Notable works on Boven Digoel have been similarly authored by communist activists or former activists on their experience while in exile, such as Wiranta’s *Antara idoep dan mati, atawa Boeron dari Boven Digoel* (Between life and death, or Escape from Boven Digoel, 1931) and Abdoelxarim M.S.’s *Pandoe anak boeangan* (Pandoe the internee, 1933). Two other works in this vein were written by authors without clear ties to the PKI such as Oen Bo Tik, *Darah dan aer-mata di Boven Digoel* (Blood and tears in Boven Digoel, 1931), and D.E. Manu Turie, *Roestam Digoelist* (Roestam the Digoelist, 1940).7

In addition to the novels by Njoo, my investigation leads me to two remarkable novels by Liem Khing Hoo. Liem, another prolific Chinese novelist, is known for compositions that are diverse in terms of genre and subject matter. Among them, I found two novels featuring proletarian concerns: one written in 1934, *Berdjoang* (Striving), a surreal story about a group of Chinese men who leave Soerabaja and establish a self-sustaining community in the jungle of Borneo which recalls the penal colony of Boven Digoel;8 the other is the aforementioned *Merah* relating the plight of cigarette factory workers in Koedoes through the voice of its protagonist, a young Javanese aristocrat-turned-labour activist who is accused of causing agitation among the workers and is subsequently banished to Digoel. In both stories, the proletarian toils and utopia serve as the background of, as

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7 One somewhat mysterious little work, also written in this vein—on the hardship of living in or escaping from Digoel, is *Lolos dari neraka Digoel* (1965), translated anonymously from Carl Domasch’s *The unpaved road from hell*. The publisher notes only that the author is a ship-hand who fell into (*terdjerumus*) the Digoel ‘hell’, but in the story the camp is no longer the political prison that it was during the colonial period. The novel relates the author/narrator’s daring escape from the jungle prison, which may well be purely fictional.

8 As early as 1972 Claudine Salmon published a commentary on *Berdjoang* and another ‘utopian’ novel by Liem, *Masjarakat* (*Society*, 1939). Unfortunately the article had been limited to French readers and only recently was made available in Indonesian; see Salmon 2010:441-64.
well as the engine that propels, a heterosexual romance that is typical in many Sino-Malay novels.

Among the three novels on Digoel discussed in this essay, compared with Liem’s *Merah* and Njoo’s *Taufan gila*, Kwee’s *Drama di Boven Digoel* is better recognized and well studied. Pramoedya makes reference to it in his collection of Digoel stories; scholars of Malay/Indonesian literature, Thomas Rieger (1989) and Jakob Sumardjo (1989), wrote an article or commented on it; another scholar, Liang Liji (2001:xxvi), extols it as ‘without doubt [...] the highest accomplishment of the Sino-Malay literature’; and editors of the multi-volume anthology of Sino-Malay literature, *Kesastraan Melayu Tionghoa dan kebangsaan Indonesia* (Sino-Malay literature and Indonesian nationhood), selected it for republication as Volume 3 of the anthology (A.S. and Benedanto 2001). Njoo’s *Taufan gila* does not escape the keen eyes of veteran sinologists Denys Lombard and Claudine Salmon (1998:185-202), but otherwise is largely unknown. Wider attention on Kwee’s *Drama* however, though warranted for its remarkable length and for Kwee’s penmanship (at least in the early part of the novel), does not reflect the depth of its engagement with issues concerning communism, proletarian struggles, or the 1926-1927 anti-colonial uprising that set off a large-scale internment of communist activists in Boven Digoel. As this article will elaborate, Kwee’s *Drama* deals with Digoel in a superficial and rather opportunistic way, especially in comparison with the two novels by Liem and Njoo on likewise Digoel-bound activists. Their divergences speak not only of the extent of each writer’s commitment to representing their communist subject, but also of the political conditions in which each of these novels was written. The fact that *Drama di Boven Digoel*, which was written at the height of the colonial communist purge, is back in circulation arguably indicates the present politics in Indonesia that is still dubious about communism and the nation’s communist past.

**Kwee Tek Hoay’s ‘Sensation’**

*Drama di Boven Digoel* was originally serialized as feuilleton in the weekly *Panorama* between 15 December 1928 and sometime in early 1932. Due to high demand, according to Kwee, it was republished in book form comprising Volumes 1 and 2 in 1938, and Volumes 3 and 4 in 1941. It was written in the aftermath of the failed November 1926 and January 1927 communist-led
anti-colonial revolts in West Java (Batavia, Bantam, and Priangan) and West Sumatra (Silungkang, Padang Panjang, and Sawah Lunto), which brought a swift response from Governor General A.C.D. de Graeff to stall the spread of communism by removing primarily the leaders and propagandists of the PKI from their respective locales. The internment camp in Boven Digoel was set up within months after the uprising to serve just this purpose. Located in the upper reaches of the Digoel River in the western part of New Guinea, a peripheral territory of the Netherlands Indies, the camp guaranteed complete isolation for a large number of people that was simultaneously in keeping with the colonial mission to open up new frontiers for the purpose of agriculture. In the introduction to the book edition, Kwee acknowledges that Drama was written when the event of the revolts, and the ensuing exile, was 'still fresh' (masih anget).

The novel relates an odd-couple romance between Moestari, a sub-district chief (assistent wedana) and son of the regent of Soekaboewana, and Noerani, a teacher of the progressive Kartini School for girls and the only daughter of a chapter (sectie) leader of Pakoempoelan Komoenis Indonesia (PKI, Association of Indonesian Communists). Thus Moestari descends from a line of aristocratic and typically conservative indigenous bureaucrats, while Noerani is the daughter of a communist propagandist who aspires to overthrow the colonial government. In the aftermath of the 12 November revolt in Batavia, Noerani’s father is detained and then banished to Digoel along with other PKI activists. Though she disagrees with her father’s politics, Noerani chooses to be a dedicated daughter and escorts her widowed and ailing father to exile. Determined to be with Noerani, Moestari deserts his parents-initiated wedding to an aristocratic girl, resigns from the civil service, and gets himself exiled to Digoel. Throughout the whole ordeal and separation, readers are told, the couple remain true to their love, unswayed by parental politics and opposition. Their love for each other overcomes all obstacles, of which the banishment to the edge of civilization, Boven Digoel, is the greatest.

Drama di Boven Digoel has been praised as Kwee’s magnum opus. Its length and his commitment to it—more than 700 pages, 58 chapters written over three years—seems to attest to the novel’s distinction. The plot is captivating—quite appropriate for the feuilleton format—with endless episodes of mix-ups, pursuits, near hits and big misses. A major misunderstanding between Noerani and Moestari at the beginning of the story serves
as the engine that propels the plot forward. A reader of *Panorama*, where the novel was originally serialized, even tendered that the romance should have been titled ‘Misunderstanding’ (*Salah mengarti*) instead of ‘Drama in Digoel’, as the penal colony only appears towards the end of the long story (*Drama* xxix). The novel is unnecessarily long; midway through it, Kwee digresses from the main plot and introduces new major characters—a Chinese novelist named Tat Mo and his daughter Dolores—who are not connected to the main plot but seem to speak for Kwee himself (more on this later). From Chapter 38 onwards the leading characters exit the stage (Noerani has departed for Digoel, Moestari in hiding after fleeing his wedding) and readers only get to follow their respective experiences through the letters they send to Tat Mo and Dolores. At this point in the novel, it is difficult to resist the impression that Kwee was trying to stretch out his story, perhaps to build readers’ anticipation for the episode in Digoel that is promised in the title, or because the feuilleton was quite popular among readers of his magazine *Panorama*. Thus from Chapters 38 to 50, the narrative is delivered almost exclusively in an epistolary manner, with Tat Mo and Dolores serving as the hub through which Noerani and Moestari keep each other (and the readers) informed.

Though the writing of *Drama* was motivated by the internment in Boven Digoel, and the sequence of events and technical details related are relatively accurate, it would be a stretch to identify this novel as a Digoel literature. As already noted, at the core of the novel is a love story between two

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9 For efficiency, references to *Drama di Boven Digoel* shall indicate the page numbers in the 2001 full version edited by Marcus A.S. and Pax Benedanto rather than the four-volume original. For the sake of authenticity, however, the original spelling is retained.

10 In the story, the characters learn of the names of communists to be exiled and their departure schedules from government announcements relayed in the newspaper. This episode mirrors the actual process of detainment, announcement of decisions, and subsequent dispatch of prisoners that were closely followed by contemporary newspapers in the Indies. Typically, the list of prisoners who had been sentenced to exile was published in the newspaper, noting their name, age, positions in or relations to PKI or its affiliates, and their last location before being detained; see, for example, ‘Orang-orang jang dikirim ka Boven Digoel’, *Sin Jit Po*, 13 June 1927. The episode of Noerani and her father, along with other prisoners and their families, embarking a ship to Digoel from the Tandjoeng Priok seaport is in fact very similar to a newspaper account of an actual embarkation of internees from the Tandjoeng Perak seaport; see ‘Ka Digoel’, *Sin Jit Po*, 14 May 1927. On contemporary press coverage of Digoel, see Yamamoto 2011.
characters that do not believe in, if not are hostile to, communism, and only by an unfortunate twist of fate find themselves in the penal colony among communists. The reference to Boven Digoel in the title, Kwee readily concedes, is ‘only to create sensation’ (sakedar boeot timboelken sensatie) as the shock of the revolt and the novelty of the concentration camp had sparked off immense curiosity on the jungle-prison in far-flung New Guinea, which then ascertained that any piece of writing on Digoel would find an audience. Only starting in Chapter 51, out of 58 chapters, the narration shifts to Digoel from the mediation by Tat Mo and Dolores in Soekaboemi. In essence, Kwee simply transplanted a conventional love story onto a specific historical context, tailored the plot around the 1926-1927 uprising, and furnished it with minor factual details.

What is even clearer about this novel is that it is not, and was never intended to be, a proletarian piece of writing. Not only are the connections with Digoel and the communist resistance superficial, Kwee makes sure that readers know where his sympathy lies. The two protagonists, Moestari and Noerani, are not only hostile to communism, they themselves are portrayed as victims of the communists. If not for Noerani’s father’s ties to the PKI, Moestari’s regent father would not have opposed their relationship. In the eyes of Noerani’s father, Boekarim, indigenous bureaucrats like Moestari and his father are ‘parasites responsible for the poverty and misery of the population’, thus deserving of the putdown ‘dog of the Dutch government’ (andjingnja pamerentah Blanda) (Drama 6, 77). On the other hand, Boekarim’s arrest and subsequent exile to Digoel is the primary cause of the couple’s separation. To the hero Moestari, the communists’ plan to revolt is a ‘dangerous action that is foolish and futile’, and it is ‘regrettable’ that Noerani’s father should be involved in it (Drama 31). On the night of the revolt, troubled Noerani lets Moestari in on the communists’ plot to launch an attack on police officers and government officials, take control of the gas and electric plants, and storm the Glodok prison. But bound by his civil servant oath to uphold the government, Moestari has to inform the police of this plot, in effect blowing the whistle on Noerani’s father.

Throughout the whole ordeal, readers are told, due to the strength of her character, Noerani remains unsusceptible to her communist milieu. ‘[I]t is true that her father is a communist leader, but Noerani’s own thinking and aspirations are never infected by the red poison’ (Drama 23). Her education and career, we are told, shield her from the communist contagion; she
does not have the time to attend those communist-organized rallies (vergadering) or follow the affairs of the movement when her father and his colleagues discuss them at home. And although Boekarim surrounds himself with leftist newspapers at home, Noerani is more drawn to the Dutch newspaper she borrows from her Dutch neighbour. Her intellectual propinquity with Dutch viewpoints, and the hospitable treatment she receives from her European colleagues at school make Noerani incapable of disliking Dutch people. On the contrary, her father’s intense aversion to the Dutch repels her. Even after she relocates to Digoel and is surrounded by communists, she avoids blending in but spends most of her time working as a nurse at the hospital there. In fact, she tries to ‘cure’ the internees of communist ‘poison’ using the knowledge she has gained from her mentor, Tat Mo.

It is clear from readers’ first introduction to the character Tat Mo that he speaks for Kwee. Many of Tat Mo’s personality traits seem to have been borrowed from Kwee himself. Tjoe Tat Mo is said to be a Chinese, a poet, novelist, playwright, translator, historian, ethnographer, and philosopher—all descriptions which can be attributed to Kwee Tek Hoay. He also runs a magazine, as Kwee did Panorama. Heaps of praise for Tat Mo’s ‘renowned masterpieces’ are structured into the dialogues, as are his criticisms of the ‘unnatural language style’ of the literary works produced by the government publishing house Balai Poestaka, and the High Malay language used in government-run schools and in most of the indigenous press. These criticisms recall Kwee’s own stance on these issues, and are obvious digressions at the

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11 Among the variety of Kwee’s works, one finds ‘Atsal moelahnja timboel pergerakan Tionghoa jang modern di Indonesia’ (1936-1939), which has been translated by Lea Williams as The origins of the modern Chinese movement in Indonesia; a translation of short stories by Gunasekara, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Rudyard Kipling in Tiga tjerita tentang toemimbal lahir (reincarnation) (1937); a collection of spiritual sermons written in 1941, Oentoek mereka jang bersedih dan menjingkir dari Kali Yoga (For those grieving and evacuating River Yoga) (1963); a meditation on education, Roema sekola jang saja impiken (My fantasy school) (1925), on philosophers such as Rubaiyat dari Omar Khayyam (Omar Khayyam’s poetry) (1936) and Hikajat penghidoepean dan peladjarannja Nabi Khong Hoe Tjoe (The life and teachings of Confucius) (1935), and on Chinese customs, told curiously from the point of view of a book, Lelakonnja boekoe ‘Pengalamannja satoe boenga anjelier’ (Account of the storybook ‘The experience of a carnation’) (1940); and spiritual novels (romans kabatinan) such as Asepnja hio dan kajoeg garoe (Fumes of incense and agar wood) (1940) and Soerat-soerat dari Paulina (Letters from Paulina) (1939). These are in addition to countless drama scripts.
expense of the plotline.\textsuperscript{12} Most revealingly, the novel \textit{Drama} is described in the story as Tat Mo’s creation, inspired by the experience of Noerani who becomes his adopted daughter.

Having attributed Tat Mo with his own biography, Kwee makes him the voice of reason among chaos. Tat Mo and his daughter Dolores give shelter to Noerani when she is at her lowest point and contemplating suicide; her father has just been incarcerated for involvement in a revolt and her romantic interest is arranged to be married to another woman. The sage-like Tat Mo helps Noerani embrace her destiny (\textit{karma}), that is, the impending exile to Boven Digoel, and more importantly reinforces her scepticism of communism. Before leaving for Digoel, she is given lessons on communism, specifically on what is wrong with this ideology. ‘Tat Mo demonstrates unequivocally, that communism has good foundation, a noble ideal. […] But the communists [in the Indies] are holding on to an erroneous foundation. They persuade people who are ignorant to join in the movement with the assurance that when the revolt succeeds, the people will be free from taxation, receive free rations and comfortable housing, and other enticing promises’ (\textit{Drama} 446-7).\textsuperscript{13} Essentially, in Tat Mo’s view, the communists exploit ‘that awful nature’ of ignorant people—‘the desire for a good life without having to work hard’. ‘The red leaders have used flimsy and misguided arguments to achieve their goals,’ he offers, because they themselves do not have sufficient understanding of the teachings of Karl Marx and other prophets of socialism and communism (\textit{Drama} 448).

Kwee’s opposition to communism is not only articulated by Tat Mo; the narratorial voice in the novel makes this clear from the very beginning. Chapter 2 opens with an introduction to Noerani’s father, the PKI chapter leader Boekarim. He is said to be a retired teacher who while being in the civil service has never harboured antipathy toward the government until a quarrel with the school inspector forces him into early retirement. After a string of hardships and low-paying jobs, Boekarim is forced to sell his house and relocates to Senen, not far from a PKI unit office, whose rallies, due to inactivity, he comes to attend frequently. Eventually organizers at PKI help

\textsuperscript{12} See, for instance, \textit{Drama}, pp. 350-1, 353, and 356.

\textsuperscript{13} Such unrealistic promises are not entirely fictional; they have been associated with local activists, usually too far down from the PKI central command for discipline; see McVey 1965:300-4.
him secure a teaching job at one of the party’s organ, a Sarekat Rakjat school, on condition that he becomes a member and adheres to the PKI’s aspirations. Thus initially Boekarim becomes a communist in order to obtain employment, but afterward he, too, buys into the idea that Indonesia will soon be independent and ruled by one of its own (a native, boemipoetra) in accordance with the Soviet system. The narrator attributes Boekarim’s conversion to communism to lack of knowledge, ‘a simple-minded person like Boekarim, who is not well versed with books and newspapers of various viewpoints, easily swallows these sorts of things’, so they ‘glorify Russia and criticize countries with colonial possessions, which they say are ruthless, repressive, and so on’ (Drama 15). For these people, the narrator continues, Russia is like ‘a paradise where the entire population lives prosperous and free’, and Indonesia can become like Russia ‘as soon as it rids itself of the Dutch government and the capitalists’ (Drama 16). Being a capable propagandist, eventually Boekarim gets promoted to head of the Senen chapter. But the motivation of communist leaders like Boekarim, we are told, is not solely false idealism; he works hard to recruit new members because his income depends on membership fees and contributions. Ignorant villagers who fall for the communist ‘fairytale’ (dongengan), the narrator relates, pawn their prized possessions or borrow money from the Arabs in order to buy a membership card. The ‘poison from Moscow’ eventually turns Boekarim into an atheist and a fanatic with anarchistic tendency; he lives without religion, because ‘he doesn’t know any God, other than Lenin’ (Drama 20).

In addition to characterizing communism as ‘fairytale’, ‘poison’, and a kind of ‘fanatism’, Kwee dehumanizes the communists. Other than Boekarim, a major communist character in the story is Radeko, a young firebrand whom Boekarim wishes to betroth to his daughter Noerani. If Boekarim makes communism seem dubious, Radeko makes it alien. He is described as a dropout of STOVIA (School tot Opleiding van Indische Artsen, or School for Native Doctors) who becomes a teacher of a PKI-sponsored school. He is of dark complexion ‘like an African’, craggy haired, wild-eyed, with a ruthless facial expression and coarse voice. He is not a Javanese, but of Ambonese or Timorese descent (Drama 12). Noerani’s father admires Radeko’s intelligence and oratory skills, and believes that he will be the Lenin of Indonesia. Radeko, who falls head over heels for Noerani, has only two missions in life: to emancipate Indonesia, where he will be ‘President of the Soviet Republic of Indonesia’, and to marry Noerani (Drama 36). So
he does everything in his power to break off Noerani and Moestari's relationship. For the couple, on the other hand, Radeko is nothing more than an arrogant boor whose persuasion skills are effective only on similarly uninformed people (Drama 59, 569). After the disastrous uprising in Batavia, Radeko manages to escape and goes undercover in Eastern Borneo. But upon learning from a newspaper announcement that Noerani is going to accompany her father to Digoel, he surrenders to the authorities and gets himself exiled as well. In Digoel, the story climaxes with Radeko tracking Moestari and Noerani to their hideout amongst the Papuan tribes and, in a duel with Moestari, is vanquished. He is taken prisoner and reduced to a subhuman existence, chained and caged like a beast, until he becomes depressed and finally commits suicide. Radeko's tragic death haunts Noerani who subsequently falls ill and dies.

To discredit communism, Kwee draws a line between it and nationalism. Even though both ideologies essentially have the same goal—that is the termination of the Dutch rule and the emancipation of Indonesia—their ways of achieving it, he suggests, are miles apart. The communists want a clean slate by obliterating the colonial institutions—to strike and if necessary kill government officials and to take control of utility plants and prisons. On the night of the revolt, they plan to stage 'a Bartolomeus Nacht that is even grander than the one in Paris in 1572' (Drama 36). Communism is represented here by unsympathetic characters like Boekarim and Radeko. However, nationalism is embodied by arguably the most commanding character in the story, Soebaidah, the aristocratic cousin of Moestari, and Noerani's bosom friend. Soebaidah is Noerani's colleague at the Kartini School, highly educated, free spirited, and a leader of the women's movement who refers to herself as Indonesiër, never a boemipoetra. She rejects the idea of overthrowing the colonial government, preferring to work together to advance the colony, 'so that if and when the Dutch grant us the right to self-government (zelfbestuur), the way the British did for Australia, Canada and other overseas colonies, certainly Indonesians will look upon the Dutch nation as a good ally and teacher to be respected and revered' (Drama 139).

14 The climax of the triangular love story is the 'drama' that the title refers to. As Tat Mo sums up the situation, a drama unfolds when both Moestari and Radeko follow Noerani to Digoel.
Kwee sums up the difference between communism and nationalism as ‘revolution’ versus ‘evolution’. Communists like Boekarim believe that ‘those who do not create their own revolution and bleed, cannot move forward’ (Drama 8). Those who are opposed to this view, such as Moestari and Tat Mo, believe that an evolutionary progression creates a stronger foundation, because ‘coerced progress by way of revolution can sometimes damage the country and doom the nation rather than achieving the goals’ (Drama 7).

Ultimately Kwee was cautious in making reference to communism at a time when the anti-communist campaign was at its peak. In the novel, not only the communists are depicted as uninformed and misguided, the government is said to be treating them sufficiently well. There are incompetent and conceited law enforcement officers, such as the police detective (recherche) and the vice-commissioner (ondercommissaris) who interrogate Noerani and Soebaidah, but the Dutch government they represent is not at all wicked—certainly no worse than the communists who try to supplant it. We are told, ‘[T]he life of the internees in Boven Digoel can be said to be content, because each of them is given a salary so they don’t need to worry about subsistence. Also, they are granted freedom and enough flexibility to establish order and peace in their community by forming a municipal government (gemeente)’ (Drama 527). The internees have a school for their children, a mosque, music groups, theatre, and library. They spend their time opening up farmlands, so that in the future they can be self-sufficient. This kind of idyllic existence had in fact been part of the government’s representation of the penal colony to fend off accusations of humanitarian abuse, and it stood in stark contrast with the high mortality rate among internees due to malaria, tuberculosis, and depression.\(^{15}\)

Kwee’s novel ends with Moestari and Soebaidah opening up parts of the jungle in cooperation with indigenous Papoean tribes, and integrating them into the Netherlands Indies jurisdiction. They have been inspired by Christian missionaries who penetrate deep into the interior and transform the native populations. They have been appointed leaders by a tribe and have developed their land and community rapidly. Their enterprise eventually gets recognition from the Dutch government, and their realm, Negri

\(^{15}\) See Kartodikromo 2002, especially Salim 1977:186-7 on neurosis and psychosis among the internees.
Kabebasan (Land of Freedom), is incorporated into the vast colonial state (Drama 738, 746). Thus in the end, despite Kwee’s portrayal of Moestari and Soebaidah as nationalists (good), as opposed to the communists (bad), the heroes of this story are but colonizers opening up new frontiers for the Dutch empire. Far from being a proletarian novel, Kwee Tek Hoay has turned Digoel, an icon of communist resistance, into an icon of love that overcomes all odds, including communism.

Liem Khing Hoo’s ‘Hell’

In 1934 Liem Khing Hoo published a surreal story about a group of Chinese men who along with their families found a self-sustaining community in a malaria-infested jungle in Borneo. The frontier-like ‘Desa Soekakerdja’ (Village of Industriousness) is commissioned by an agency called Peneloeng Penganggoeran Tionghoa (Chinese Unemployment Support) based in Soerabaja. The group clears up the jungle and cultivates the land, while ensuring that no capitalist (kaoem modal) gains access to their community. There is one cooperative store owned collectively, but residents are free to open up modest shops and food stalls of their own. While the narrator maintains that ‘the community does not adhere to the principles of communism’, it shares a close resemblance with the penal colony in Boven Digoel. The residents, we are told, live by the tenet ‘sama rasa sama rata’ (solidarity, equality), which was generally associated with Indies communism, and collective possession is managed by a kongsie (clan, company, fellowship). But unlike the floundering Digoel experiment, Liem’s fictional utopia flourishes; the population grows from 240 to 2000 and lives in relative prosperity. Claudine Salmon has pointed out that this novel called Berdjoang (Striving) was written against the backdrop of the 1930s Depression, when unemployment among young Chinese men was a major problem.

Although Berdjoang communicates some proletarian concerns such as unemployment and capitalist encroachment, Liem’s novel Merah (Red) is much more explicit in spotlighting labour issues, the communist movement, and the resultant Digoel project. Written in 1937, almost a decade after Kwee began his feuilleton Drama di Boven Digoel, Merah’s storyline however predates the 1926-1927 communist revolt and gives an account of an activist protagonist who is accused of agitation and consequently exiled to Digoel. The protagonist is fashioned from the same mould as the
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aristocrat heroes in Kwee’s *Drama* and Semaoen’s *Hikajat Kadioen*; the fresh graduate Soebagia is a grandson of a regent and son of the district chief (*wedana*) of Rembang. In this regard Liem simply follows the literary convention of the time, that a protagonist from a privileged background is more appealing than an ordinary one.

*Merah* recounts Soebagia who upon graduation from OSVIA (Opleiding School voor Inlandsche Ambtenaren, Training School for Native Officials) goes to work for Hadji Mohamad Zainal, his future father-in-law and proprietor of a cigarette factory Koepoe Taroeng in Koedoes, Central Java. Soon however he discovers abscesses (*borok*) in the company, stemming from the ruthless way Hadji Zainal treats his workers. It turns out that his fiancée’s father is a miserly employer whose fortune ‘is likely to have come from sapping the sweat and tears of thousands of coolies’ (Liem 1937:21). Hadji Zainal treats his workers like machines, and gives them rations appropriate for dogs and lodgings (*pemondokan*) comparable to cow barns (Liem 1937:33). For years his workers endure this ‘hellish’ condition, because their wages are inadequate and largely withheld by Hadji Zainal to prevent them from deserting his factory.

At some point, we are told, his workers go on strike and Soebagia, who has spoken out on their behalf, is accused of agitation (*mengasoet*) and later on of being a ‘red’ activist. The labour inspector (*arbeidsinspecteur*) who investigates the dispute finds Hadji Zainal at fault and orders him to pay back wages and compensations. Because of the victorious outcome, Soebagia is hailed as protector of workers (*pelindoeng kaoem boeroeh*) and appointed chairman of the Cigarette Workers Union (Sarekat Boeroeh Rokok). Convinced that Soebagia is a ‘dangerous red agitator’, Hadji Zainal calls off the engagement to his daughter, while Soebagia’s disgraced parents disown him. Meanwhile, the progressive daughter of the regent of Koedoes is falling for Soebagia as his union gains reputation among workers and causes a stir (*kegemparan*) among cigarette factory owners in the region. When the communist uprising takes place in West Java, the regent finds a way to ‘dispose of’ Soebagia in order to separate him from his daughter, Tirtaningsih.16

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16 Such a thing is known to have actually occurred in many instances, where local officials used the statewide communist purge as an opportunity to settle personal vendettas. After a year in Digoel, 30 internees who had been mistaken for communists were returned as free men; see ‘Ada apa di Digoel?’, *Pewarta Deli*, 13 March 1930. In 1930 a member of the Indies Parliament, W.P. Hillen, was commissioned to study the conditions of the internees,
On false charges, Soebagia is arrested and subsequently exiled to Digoel along with other ‘red’ activists, even though he does not identify himself as a communist and has declined invitation to join the PKI.

*Merah*’s episode of Digoel in some regards is not different from other accounts on the subject—description of the climate, the internees, their dismal condition, malaria, black fever, the musical and theatre groups, the cooperative, the stipend, the school, and so on. Having had the benefit of a detailed and candid account of the internment camp written by the communist leader Marco Kartodikromo, ‘Pergaoelan orang boeangan di Boven Digoel’ (Interactions among internees in Boven Digoel), which was published in instalments between 10 October and 9 December 1931 in *Pewarta Deli*, Liem’s Digoel is far from idyllic.17 There is little doubt that Marco’s account had influenced the composition of *Merah*, while other contemporaneous writings on Digoel such as Wiranta’s *Antara idoep dan mati* and Abdoelxarim M.S.’s *Pandoe anak boeangan* do not seem to be relevant. Echoing Marco, Liem’s narrator analogizes Digoel as ‘the Siberia of Indonesia’ and a ‘hell’ (*neraka*), the very same expression his protagonist uses to describe the conditions that workers in Hadji Zainal’s factory faced (Liem 1937:89).

Liem’s account of the internment camp however ends abruptly with the unexpected arrival of Tirtaningsih, who in the meantime has followed Soebagia to Digoel by falsely claiming to be his wife. At this turn, the camp no longer feels like the expected climax of a proletarian story, but a mere prop for a love story (à la Kwee’s *Drama*); it becomes a token of sacrifice that allows Tirtaningsih to demonstrate her love for Soebagia. The hardship of living in Digoel is supposed to make her decision to follow him there seem exceptionally selfless. One wonders whether *Merah* is just another conventional romance story and whether Digoel is once again treated as a literary commodity. In my reading, the answer is ‘no’ for at least two reasons.

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17 Marco himself died of tuberculosis in 1932. The narrative style of the composition suggests that it was penned by at least two authors, perhaps because the non-compliant Marco was sent to a more isolated and harsher prison camp, Tanah Tinggi, in 1929 and his health was failing.
Firstly, *Merah* has the gravity that the feuilleton *Drama* could not afford. Liem purposely sets his story in Koedoes, because this particular regency had been the centre of batik production and especially *kretek* (clove cigarette) industries since the beginning of the twentieth century. At one point Koedoes was host to more than 200 *kretek* factories. Koedoes and its *kretek* factories is thus an ideal site for a fictional representation of capitalistic exploitation that is the central theme of *Merah*. More importantly, for the most part (approximately 70 per cent) the novel is devoted to issues that concern the workers: a system that exploits one segment of the society for the benefit of another, the harsh living and working conditions of factory workers, union activities, and the communist purge. There is an earnest attempt to spotlight the excesses of capitalism. The fate of a coolie (*koeli*), as one worker sums up to Soebagia, ‘remains that of a machine, not a human being’ (Liem 1937:33). In turn Soebagia observes that the industrial ‘hell’—that is the factory (*fabriek*), where employees are overworked and ailing ones are laid off—‘is created by a system embedded in our society’ (Liem 1937:70). In this regard, Liem’s engagement with his fictional workers is not at all transient or crude like Kwee’s treatment of his communist characters.

In *Merah*, the factory workers are not glossed over as a nameless mass. Karsiman is the worker who confides in Soebagia and pioneers the establishment of the cigarette workers union. Readers also get a glimpse of the workers’ daily existence and challenges such as housing, low wage, layoff, bad health, and debts—something uncommon in contemporary popular literature. In most Sino-Malay novels thus far, underclass characters remain nameless; they are the servant, the maid, the chauffer, the guard, a beggar, a prostitute, a peasant, a robber, a disaster victim, a plantation worker, and other types of industrial worker. These characters are generally reduced to exchange relations, recognized only in terms of their economic functions. In *Merah*, it is precisely the treatment of workers as industrial machines that is being underscored by drawing attention to their humanity through not only descriptions of their discontent but also sensory imageries of their living conditions.

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18 Kasijanto (1992) has written a short paper that reconstructs the history of industrialization of Koedoes using Liem’s *Merah* as a source among others.
Though brief, Liem gives readers a sensory experience of being a coolie through descriptions of the sight, sound, and smell of their living quarters. ‘[T]he kampoeng is now muddy because it rained this afternoon. There is sludge everywhere and the air is revolting because the wastewater doesn’t go through’ (Liem 1937:70). ‘On the narrow muddied road, they stumble upon a man being dragged away by a police officer and the foreman’, it is a coolie who refuses to evacuate his lodging after being released (Liem 1937:72). In this space of abjection readers encounter a sick child, a fresh corpse of a middle-aged coolie surrounded by wailing wife and children, and in a dilapidated shack a distressed young mother whose husband has just been laid off. In Merah, these objects of revulsion are deliberately presented as some kind of societal industrial waste—the filth, the stench, the sick, the dead, and the lamentation come together as the effects of capitalism.

Secondly, the protagonist in Merah has genuine sympathy for the labour movement. If the protagonists in Kwee’s Drama only reluctantly join in the exile (Noerani because of her father, Moestari because of Noerani), Soebagia is portrayed as a passionate leader of the labour union. If Moestari feigns personal ties with a communist in order to be with his love interest, Soebagia becomes a labour activist at the cost of his engagement to Hadji Zainal’s daughter.

But like Kwee, Liem too had to navigate the politics of anti-communism and away from potential government censorship, thus Merah refrains from criticizing the colonial government or its officials. The regents are portrayed as noble and fair-minded people, except for Tirtaningsih’s father who exploits the communist purge to keep Soebagia away from her. The government is also represented by a labour inspector who rules impartially. The Dutch assistant resident in Digoel, Stokvis, is described as an upright character; he discovers that Soebagia has been sent to Digoel on false charges, hence requests amnesty for him. We are to infer that this high-ranking bureaucrat is wise and able to make the distinction between genuine (non-violent), well-intentioned activists like Soebagia and those who are interned because of complicity in rebellion. After all, Soebagia is not even a communist or member of the PKI. In defending him, Tirtaningsih maintains that Soebagia ‘is not one of those red people who are against capitalists’, he only wants to protect the interests of the poor (melindoengin kapentingan si kaoem melarat) (Liem 1937:77). Thus even though Liem does
not speak ill of communists, he steers clear from identifying his protagonist as one or associating him with the PKI.

But if the novel absolves the colonial government of culpability for the workers’ misery, it pins the blame on capitalists, more specifically the factory owners. The cigarette manufacturers are portrayed as a group of shady people and the protagonist’s main adversaries—they plot to make Soebagia ‘disappear’. Hadji Zainal, who personifies the factory owners, is the source of all misery in the story (of the afflicted workers and the lovelorn Soebagia). One wonders however why Liem had chosen a ‘hajji’ for the role of the capitalist villain, especially because a Chinese factory owner could very easily slide into this role. The long history of commercial rivalry between Chinese and hadji business owners in Koedoes was well known and documented, in particular by the Chinese journalist and novelist Tan Boen Kim in his rather partial investigative report of the 1918 riot in Koedoes, Peroesoehan di Koedoes. Liem must have been familiar with Tan’s account as his description of the workers’ living quarters in Merah is curiously similar to a scene of the city in the aftermath of the 1918 riot cited in Tan’s book. But to speculate that Liem had been motivated by racial prejudice in his choice of a hajji over a Chinese industrialist for the villain is also hasty, because Liem was among the most progressive Chinese writers of his time (having preference, for instance, for the term Indonesiëër over the derogatory ‘boempietra’ when writing in his own voice). The most plausible explanation is that the hero of Merah is an Indonesiëër, which makes the pairing with an Indonesian villain seem less problematic.

It appears that the novel Merah is Liem’s attempt to critique capitalism without putting himself at risk of being accused as a PKI sympathizer. He does this by denying his hero the label ‘communist’ or association with the PKI, and by packaging his narrative as a romance. The concluding episode where Tirtaningsih out of the blue arrives in Digoel to join Soebagia seems rushed and too predictable (for a novel taking up so unconventional a subject), occupying only the last 10 pages of the novel. This makes Merah less a love story than a narrative of a political nature, clothed in a prosaic romance.

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19 Judging from his other works, Liem would not have a problem chastising Chinese persons whom he considered corrupt. In the novel Pengorbanan (Sacrifice), he paints the Chinese opium dealers and pawnbrokers as ‘leeches’, and their Chinese official cronies as a group of ‘ass kissers’ (pendjilat pantat); see Liem 1931:89.
plot. One thus needs to read this novel with caution and be mindful of the elisions—the unwritable politics—stemming from Liem's self-censorship.

The novel *Merah* was unique and somewhat unexpected, sandwiched in Liem's large oeuvre by two ethnographic novels, *Gowok* (1936) and *Bontotan* (1937). The communist revolt by then had elapsed for about a decade, so had the novelty of the internment camp in Digoel. In the meantime there had been many writings, fictional and especially journalistic, devoted to Digoel, diminishing its commercial appeal by 1937. It is safe to say that Liem did not write *Merah*, as Kwee did, in order to ‘create sensation’. In the 1930s, the majority of new prisoners exiled to Digoel were no longer of the PKI, but of its nationalist reincarnation Partai Republik Indonesia (PARI, Republic of Indonesia Party) and a mixture of nationalist and radical Islamist parties. Communism had remained a sensitive subject, but was not off limits. National emancipation, too, had been openly discussed in the 1930s, but is never broached in *Merah*, which makes the novel rather conservative in this regard. This absence sets the novel apart from colonial proletarian works in general, whose themes often coincide with the issue of political liberation. It might have something to do with the fact that Liem was of Chinese descent, a ‘foreign Oriental’ in the colonial civil category, which placed him above ‘natives’ like Semaoen and Marco Kartodikromo, both pioneers of the communist movement in Indonesia. These categories and their implicit hierarchy gave little incentive for the Chinese in the Indies to identify themselves with the burgeoning Indonesian nation. This lack of identification as a subjugated people may also explain the poverty of proletarian-themed works by Indies Chinese authors. It would take an altogether different political landscape and a writer with a different outlook toward Indonesia before a more candid work on Digoel could be conceived.

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20 Among others, Partai National Indonesia-Baru (PNI-Baru, New Indonesian Nationalist Party), Partai Indonesia (PARTINDO, Indonesian Party), Persatuan Muslimin Indonesia (PERMI, United Muslims of Indonesia), and Partai Sarekat Islam Indonesia (PSII, Indonesian Islamic Association Party).

21 Political liberation is usually one of the main themes in proletarian arts of colonized territories; for instance, this is what distinguished the proletarian writers of Korea and Taiwan from those of Japan, albeit intimate ties between these groups. See among others, Perry 2006:279-309 and Kida and Bergstrom 2006:495-525.
Njoo Cheong Seng’s Memento

Taufan gila, Bung Daeng mentjari kiamat (Mad typhoon, Brother Daeng seeking doomsday) was written during or shortly after Njoo Cheong Seng’s sojourn in Makassar with his theatre troupe Sandiwara Pantjawarna in the late 1940s, thus the subtitle ‘A journey’s keepsake’ (Oleh-oleh dari perantauan). It tells the story of Ishaka Daeng Talli, or Bung Daeng as he is referred to in the novel, a real-life PKI member from Makassar who was interned in Digoel between 1927 and 1932. By the time Taufan gila was written, Ishaka had become a dear friend of Njoo (one of the few local cronies the author fraternized with in Makassar), and Ishaka’s name is referenced in many Makassar-themed novels Njoo wrote such as Dendang-dendang Makassar (Makassar melodies, 1949), Sio sayang 1896 (Oh dear 1896, 1950), Asep hio di Malino (Incense fumes of Malino, 1950), Gagaklodra mentjari Allah; Kotjar-katjir di Makassar (Gagaklodra searching for God; Mayhem in Makassar, 1950), Manusia sampurna jang tidak sampurna (The flawed flawless man, 1950), and Bidadari binal (Naughty nymphet, 1950). Njoo and Ishaka were of the same generation, the latter being no more than two or three years older.

With the author of Merah, Liem Khing Hoo (also known by his penname Romano), Njoo went back a long way. In 1925 together with Ong Ping Lok (aka Monsieur Novel), their contemporary, Liem and Njoo gave birth to a very successful literary monthly Penghidopan (Life), second only to Tjerita Roman (Romance story), their other literary collaboration, which was launched in 1928 and lasted until the Japanese occupation. They were also behind the cultural magazine Liberty, launched in 1928. These many projects were partly the reason why a good number of their works were written under pseudonyms. Being the chief writers for these magazines, they had to make it appear as if the magazines had a larger pool of contributors. The novel Taufan gila was written under Njoo’s nom de plume Monsieur d’Amour, which he appears to have started using since 1924, and was

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22 For a good account on Njoo in the late 1940s, see his autobiographical novel, Sjorga bukan sjorga tidak dengan Melinda (No paradise without Melinda, 1950). For an introduction to the life and works of Njoo Cheong Seng, see Sidharta 1995.

23 In a newspaper announcement of his exile, Ishaka is noted to be 28 years old in 1927, which makes him two or three years older than Njoo. See ‘Orang-orang jang dikirim ka Boven Digoel’, Sin Jit Po, 13 June 1927.
published in the post-war reincarnation of *Tjerita Roman*, the bi-monthly *Tjilik Roman’s* (Romance youth), launched in January 1949.\(^{24}\)

Elsewhere I have written in greater detail about the progression of political outlook and national identification in Njoo Cheong Seng's works (Chandra 2011). In essence, his growing affinity for the budding Indonesian nation in many ways makes sense the two proletarian-themed novels he published in *Tjilik Roman’s* in the April and May 1950 issues: *Taufan gila* and *Manusia sampurna jang tidak sampurna*.\(^ {25}\) While both novels feature communist-leaning protagonists moulded from Njoo’s real-life friends in Makassar, *Taufan gila* is more explicit in its political content and especially in its direct connection with Digoel. Njoo published at least seven novels in 1950 alone, which suggests that some of them must have been written in the 1940s during the Japanese occupation and the subsequent revolutionary war, but were only published after Indonesia’s formal independence, when a number of suspended journals and publishers resumed operation. Ishaka’s experience in Digoel, that is the core content of *Taufan gila*, must have been recounted to Njoo sometime between 1948 and 1949.\(^{26}\) The two proletarian-themed novels are among the most profound Njoo has ever written, which, one imagines, came with his maturity as a writer, as well as the momentous political change that took place in the 1940s. Those who are familiar with the works of Njoo Cheong Seng and Liem Khing Hoo would agree that this type of weighty story is more likely to be penned by Liem instead of Njoo. But Liem passed away before the Pacific War ended after being detained and tortured by the Japanese authorities.

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\(^{24}\) There were writers, of course, who used pennames for other reasons. Kwee Seng Tjoan, for instance, made no secret that he also wrote as Juvenile Kuo. But the editors at *Tjilik Roman’s* took distinguishing between Njoo Cheong Seng and Monsieur d’Amour’ rather seriously, at one point printing a correction of its own advertisements, that *Sjorga bukan sjorga tidak dengan Melinda* was not penned by Njoo Cheong Seng, but by M. d’Amour; see *Tjilik Roman’s* no. 31, August 1950.

\(^{25}\) In an article Salmon (2010:505-22) makes reference to a short story written by Njoo on the plight of traditional Madurese fishermen in competition against modern Japanese fishing vessels, ‘Achmad dan Kasijah’, *Sin Bin*, 17 October 1925. Much work remains to be done with regard to compiling and studying Njoo’s short stories.

\(^{26}\) The story is set in 1930 and 1931, and the narrator notes Ishaka recalling the experience ‘18 years later’ (Njoo 1950:55).
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(Salmon 1981:239).

Nevertheless, being composed in the new political reality that was independent Indonesia, and with the benefit of historical hindsight, Njoo’s *Taufan gila* is even more profound than Liem’s *Merah* and Kwee’s *Drama* with regard to its representations of Digoel and the communists. By then, the internment camp had been closed down and the prisoners repatriated since Japan took over the Dutch colony.

Curiously, in their reading of *Taufan gila*, Lombard and Salmon situate the novel in the context of its publication, that is in post-war Indonesia, when ethnic Chinese in the recently sovereign nation were confronted with profound issues of a political nature. As they point out, in the span of less than a decade many publications by Chinese authors revolved around the tumultuous experience of the 1940s, marked by accounts of being political prisoners under the Japanese occupation and followed by stories of hardship and displacement during Indonesia’s war of independence (Salmon 2010:505-22). In terms of subject matter, however, *Taufan gila* does not belong with narratives of the 1940s as it revisits the Boven Digoel experience of the 1920s. Where I differ from Lombard and Salmon is precisely because this essay reads *Taufan Gila* in terms of its author’s treatment of his political subject and situates it in comparison with other Chinese authors’ representation (fictional or otherwise) of Digoel-bound communist activists.

It is admittedly challenging to illustrate what kind of story *Taufan gila* is; it does not lend itself to neat summation. A romance develops halfway through the novel, but is not at all consequential to the plot. It does not focus solely on Digoel or communism either, but is devoted to recounting the episode of Ishaka’s life when he was interned in Digoel. A short verse by Njoo, addressed to Ishaka, at the beginning of the novel makes clear the author’s intention: ‘Allow me to compose the magic of your life story / Not in order to scorn / Nor to praise / Nor to reproach / Nor to excuse’ (Njoo 1950:1). The novel’s content is dotted with verses (*sjair*) in Makassarese,

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27 In Pouw Kioe An’s prison memoir (1947:81-3), Liem is said to have been framed, resulting in a charge of unlawful possession of firearms.

28 The internees were in fact freed by what was left of the Dutch East Indies bureaucracy in the easternmost part of the colony. The Dutch government did not want to see these ‘radicals’ liberated by and become allies of the incoming Japanese troops. They were transferred first to Australia before being returned to Indonesia. Given the choice, some former internees opted to reside in the Netherlands as they were legally under the responsibility of the Dutch government.
supposedly composed by the character Ishaka, and the vernacular in which they are written seems to confirm it. All things considered, *Taufan gila* is a personal and political reflection of Ishaka, told through Njoo, on a life caught in the political ‘typhoon’ of the 1920s.

The novel opens with a bizarre, dream-like scene. It is 1930, we are told, and the protagonist Ishaka finds himself locked up in a hospital room, alone. He is unsure of his ailment, even more puzzled by what has brought him there. He sees no one except hospital attendants who bring in his meals three times a day, and then the times when he gets a ‘roommate’—successively two mentally ill patients and a Dutch sailor who pretends to be insane after a run-in with the law. After a while Ishaka understands that he is being isolated, cut off from other human beings and deemed insane ‘at the doctor’s [and] the government’s order’ (Njoo 1950:9). Soon we learn that Ishaka is an internee, ‘a Digoelist’.29 He has been brought to Ambon after a protracted quarrel with a group of internees, due to which he has filed a series of protests and demands for relocation at the offices of the assistant resident of Digoel and governor of Ambon. Instead of having his complaints processed, in Ambon he is kept in an asylum (*rumah gila*). After nine months in the hospital and pushed to the edge of sanity, Ishaka is sent back to Digoel a changed man. He claims to have found ‘the shore’ and is now able to look back on the ‘typhoon’ that has brought him to where he is—in the penal colony for communists. At this point in life Ishaka has never been more certain of the goodness of communism, but at the same time he is determined not to let himself ‘be toyed’ by his (PKI) associates, by the government, or by the circumstances.

The middle part of the novel tells us of Ishaka’s budding relationship with Djuarsih, daughter of a fellow internee, to whom he recounts his journey from Makassar to exile. The 1926-1927 communist purge and the resultant exile are thus told in flashback, and, as such, his love interest Djuarsih serves as no more than a narrative device by which Ishaka’s story is relayed to the readers.30

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29 Published in 1950, this novel has adapted to the Suwandi spelling system, thus ‘Digoel’ had by then become ‘Digul’. For consistency, except in book titles, I use the old spelling throughout this article.

30 In the novel Ishaka is described as married and is accompanied by wife and children to exile, but his family returns to Makassar when things turn ugly between Ishaka and his fellow internees. As the internment in Digoel was without a fixed term, in many cases such a
From Ishaka’s recollections, we learn of his passage to Digoel. In good spirits he and his fellow communists of Makassar board the ship that is taking them to exile ‘like soldiers departing for a battle’—‘smiling countenances, jovial laughs, and together they sing . . . the “Internationale”’ (Njoo 1950:37). They are among the third group of internees to join the penal colony in 1927 (Njoo 1950:81). Some of the names cited in the novel also appeared in the 13 June 1927 issue of *Sin Jit Po*, in the list of internees from Makassar.31 Ishaka was listed as ‘Ishak’ and described as ‘a former student journalist and agent of the Singer Corporation, member of Sarekat Rakjat, secretary of the Peasants Union, the Drivers Union, and the Market Vendors Union, and a propagandist of PKI’. This information in *Sin Jit Po* is more or less consistent with what is recounted in the novel.

Before long readers learn of the rifts that unfold among the internees. Ishaka describes three factions in Digoel: those who have abandoned any pretence of resistance and willingly work with and for the government; those who refuse to go along with government programmes but nonetheless attempt to turn Digoel into a habitable place; and lastly a group he calls ‘a bunch of bums’, so ‘radical’ that they not only refuse to participate in collective public service, but also detest anyone who tries to make life in Digoel bearable (Njoo 1950:83). Ishaka himself concurs with the second group and, because he refuses to work for the government (generally involving land clearing and cultivation), he tries to be self-sufficient by farming eggs and selling cakes. His relative success earns him enemies among ‘the radicals’ who accuse him of being content with life in exile and is doing a favour for the government by being a model internee. Some of them even go so far as to accuse him of spying for the government. Eventually, frustrated by these accusations, and because his formal protests fail to garner administrative intervention, Ishaka takes action by neglecting his farm, littering the streets, and yelling profanities at government officials (Njoo 1950:101). Soon he is deemed a pest by the authorities and a disease by his detractors, and is subsequently dispatched to Ambon to be locked up in an asylum.32

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31 ‘Orang-orang jang dikirim ka Boven Digoel’, *Sin Jit Po*, 13 June 1927.
32 Though Njoo does not entertain this possibility, it appears that the internment in Digoel had for a time had effects on Ishaka’s mental state (in which case the administrator’s
This type of rift among internees is frequently brought up in first-hand accounts of Digoel. It is peculiar that in Marco’s iconic piece, ‘Pergaoelan orang boeangan di Boven Digoel’, the communist leader spends more pages lamenting the discord among internees than he does criticizing the government. The rifts were due to a number of factors—recriminations over the ill-fated revolt, competition for influence over the internees, jealousy over women whose number was limited, and rampant accusations of spying for the government (Kartodikromo 2002; Salim 1977). This kind of ugly fracture among the communists in the end, we are told, gives Ishaka a better understanding of himself as an activist, and the ability to disentangle communism, the philosophy, from its institutions and actors.

But it is precisely this spotlighting of a self-identified communist that sets Taufan gila apart from Merah and Drama di Boven Digoel. In fact, Njoo makes this aspect the centrepiece of Ishaka’s story. We learn from Ishaka’s account that within days after the 12 November 1926 revolt in West Java, approximately 25 PKI activists in Makassar including himself are rounded up. During interrogation he is accused of espionage and being involved in arms smuggling into Makassar. When asked by the interrogator if he has joined the PKI on a lark, Ishaka bravely replies that he is ‘a true communist’ (seorang kommunist sedjati) who has joined the organization after studying its principles, and that he ‘believes that the communist way will lead to goodness’ (Njoo 1950:31). When pressed further about his views on communism, he offers, ‘The goal of communism is actually quite good if it can be realized properly and without interference. The aim of communism is to improve the human condition (perbaeki keadaan manusia), to foster a life that is equal on equal foundation. […] So it won’t happen that one lives in the middle of a paddy field but is starving; or lives next to the ocean or the river but is thirsty; or works in a textile or clothing factory but is unclothed’ (Njoo 1950:30-1). When confronted with the fact that the communist revolt in Java has taken casualties and upset public order, Ishaka maintains that indeed communism cannot coexist with imperialism, but that the communists in Makassar will seek an alternative solution to this problem. For decision in the story to keep him in an asylum is not as irrational and conspiratorial as Ishaka portrays it). In Salim’s account, mental illness as a result of being so abruptly removed from human civilization was quite prevalent among internees; see especially chapters 6 and 10 of his Lima belas tahun Digoel.
evidence, he offers, ‘There is no uprising in Makassar or even in the entire South Sulawesi’ (Njoo 1950:32).

Ishaka also talks about the arbitrariness of justice. He understands that he is exiled because communism is ‘opposed to the ideology espoused by the government’, and that if he were in Russia he ‘would have been a hero’ (Njoo 1950:27). He recognizes that Digoel is a place to banish not only the communists who rebelled, but also those who in the eyes of the paranoid authorities ‘are plotting or will plot to resist the government’ (Njoo 1950:81). The government’s overreaction is underscored here, because in reality a large number of internees came from regions where revolts did not occur such as Makassar. From Ishaka’s account we also learn that the interrogation process could not have been credible. He is charged with plotting to harm an assistant director (bestuursassistent), organizing arms smuggling into Makassar, and espionage. He is accused of instigating a strike among the Singer Sewing Machine Company workers in Makassar, which he insists had taken place a year before the revolt in Java. He is also held complicit in PKI activities in Timor, Kupang, even though, Ishaka maintains, when he travelled to Kupang with his supervisor at Singer, ‘PKI agitation had become widespread (pergolakan PKI sudah meradjalela)’ in that region (Njoo 1950:35). Worse, in the official police report (procesverbaal), all instances of answering ‘don’t know’ were somehow recorded as ‘denies’ (menjangkal).

But even after being banished to Digoel, Ishaka maintains he does not regret joining the communist movement. He does not regret his run-ins with the authorities or with the ‘radical’ communists in Digoel either. If anything, we are told, the whole Digoel experience helps him comprehend communism even more (in what sense, though, neither Ishaka nor Njoo elaborates). He confesses to be initially drawn to the PKI by the charisma and graciousness of a PKI leader in Kupang, whom he has come to be acquainted with during a work trip as a Singer employee. But the superficial dalliance with communism has since matured—Ishaka leaves Digoel more assured of its merits. The only thing wrong with communism, he understands, is that there is no room for it in the imperialist system. He continues to believe that ‘there will come a time when the whole world recognizes

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33 Overall, internees from Java greatly outnumbered those from other islands; see Salim 1977:37.
one ideology (*paham*), that is the sacred philosophy of the International Communism (*Kommunisme Internationaal*) (Njoo 1950:78).

As *Taufan gila* was written a few years after Indonesia proclaimed independence, Njoo had the freedom, which Liem and Kwee did not have, to give an uninhibited accounting of how the colonial government dealt with communist activists in response to the 1926-1927 revolts. Personal accounts of this aspect remain scarce, as former Digoelists who wrote about their experience and published it during the colonial period often had to censor themselves. Cases in point are the aforementioned *Antara idoep dan mati* by Wiranta (1931) and *Pandoe anak boeangan* by Abdoelxarim M.S. (1933), which astonishingly manage to sidestep references to the role of the Dutch government in Digoel. The internees’ trials and tribulations, we gather from these stories, come not from the overpowering feeling of isolation and the prisoners’ feral existence in the jungle-prison, but precisely from their attempts to flee from it. The moral of these stories, one infers, is resignation to one’s fate and obedience to the authorities. Marco’s account which, true to his idealism, does not spare the government’s hard-handed treatment of internees, nonetheless covers only the period from when the internees arrived in Digoel and spends more pages bemoaning their falling-out. Though such elisions in Wiranta’s and Abdoelxarim’s works speak loudly of the unwritable politics in the 1930s, any account of this period we can glean is of course valuable.

Ultimately what makes Ishaka’s story remarkable is that it adds colour to the meagre and often monotone collection of personal narratives of Digoel—aided in no small way by Njoo’s keen sense of good stories and penmanship. The story of an activist finding himself after a doomed quest for utopia is richly presented in a narrative and format that straddle both memoir and novel, facts and fiction. Moreover, accounts of the Digoel experience thus far have been overwhelmingly represented by internees from Java and Sumatra. But as the character Ishaka points out, the Dutch

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34 Almost halfway through the novel (most notably from Chapter 3 to Chapter 6), there are subtle changes, both in terms of narration and plotline. While the preceding and succeeding chapters are generally told in a descriptive manner (relating Ishaka’s recollections), the middle chapters have long dialogues and ‘wild’ subplots, including a budding romance. One senses more ‘Njoo’ and less ‘Ishaka’ there.

35 The one account close to being comprehensive is the memoir of I.F.M. Chalid Salim, *Lima belas tahun Digoel*, published in its Dutch original in 1973.
government also banished activists from places where revolts did not occur. Such an imbalanced representation of history is perhaps the reason why Ishaka’s name is not even in the list of internees compiled in Purnama Suwardi’s *Koloni pengucilan Boven Digoel* (*The exile colony of Boven Digoel*), which claims to include ‘names frequently cited in history sources because of their activities at that time’ (Suwardi 2003:110). This oversight is in part due to the fact that Suwardi did not consult the publications on Digoel by Chinese writers and Sino-Malay newspapers, because Njoo Cheong Seng made references to Ishaka in many of his novels and Ishaka’s name is noted (at the very least) in the newspaper *Sin Jit Po*, as already mentioned.

This kind of historical omission takes us squarely to the reason why Njoo wrote this semi-biographical novel in the first place. The ‘keepsake’ in the novel’s subtitle also signals a memento—a reminder of those erased by the persistent forgetting of history. In retrospect, Njoo writes, ‘Digoel has become a place from where big and little men emerged. There they shared one principle and one stand, one destiny and one struggle, but today they play on different fields’ (Njoo 1950:108). A former Digoelist, Mohammad Hatta, has by then become prime minister of the young republic, ‘taking on a big role on the world stage’. Another former internee, Sutan Sjahrir, had earlier held the premiership. J. Mewengkang at the moment was toiling for his newspaper *Indonesia Timur*, while Ishaka Daeng Talli ‘still roams Makassar, leading a modest life, abiding the time...when the truth shall arrive...when the sole Creator shall beckon’ (Njoo 1950:109).

**Conclusions**

So what do the differences between these novels tell us?

The most notable element is a progression of sympathy for the communist movement and those who were banished to Digoel. From Kwee’s portrayal of communists as a group of misinformed people infected by ‘Moscow poison’; to Liem’s presentation of workers’ misery as an ‘abscess’ of capitalism and in effect making a hero out of a labour activist; to Njoo’s generous and affectionate portrayal of an actual communist activist coming to terms with the consequences of his politics. Matters of proletarian struggle are not significant in *Taufan gila*, but Njoo does make the crucial link between heroes of the Indonesian independence and the 1920s communists—that there was a time when these two categories actually shared references, ‘one
destiny, one struggle’. Already in 1950 it had become apparent to Njoo that the memory of Digoel and of communist activists like Ishaka, and especially their role as pioneers of national emancipation, had begun to erode.

Arguably, these different degrees of sympathy for the communist movement were in part due to the progression of time. In 1928 when Kwee began writing *Drama di Boven Digoel*, the politics of anti-communism was at its peak. It would have been impossible to write a sympathetic account of the communists without attracting unfavourable attention from the government.\textsuperscript{36} In 1937 when Liem published *Merah*, the revolt had become an old story and the Digoel project was being reassessed. In the 1930s, anti-colonial politics had taken a more nationalistic tone and manifested in intellectual-journalistic discourses, away from the proletarian-based mobilizational politics (such as rallies, strikes, boycotts, and agitations) that was the hallmark of the communist movement. The political environment had become more conducive to sympathetic writings of labour struggle, so long as the villain was not the government. In retrospect, Njoo’s *Taufan gila* came out at the most ideal time. Written at the cusp of Indonesia’s de facto independence, the novel came out when socialism in the arts was on the rise, marked by the founding of the association of leftist artists, Lekra, on 17 August 1950—four months after *Taufan gila* was published.\textsuperscript{37} Njoo himself could not be classified as a leftist writer, even if he befriended leftist artists and wrote affectionately about some of them. Political affinity seems to be less of a factor in the conception of *Taufan gila*.

Needless to say, it is ironic that the most conservative of the three novels, Kwee Tek Hoay’s *Drama di Boven Digoel*, is the one currently in circulation, being selected for republication in the multi-volume anthology of Sino-Malay literature, *Kesastraan Melayu Tionghoa dan kebangsaan Indonesia*,

\textsuperscript{36} It should be noted that Kwee was similarly disdainful of Chinese nationalism in the Indies, as evident in his searing criticism of young men who enlisted to go to China after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 in his novel *Pendekar dari Chapei* (The champ of Chapei) (1932); see also his play *Korbannya Yi Yung Thoan* (Victim of the Brigade of Courage) (1928), compiled in Damono and Budianta 2009.

\textsuperscript{37} Former PKI members regrouped when Dutch rule ended but were splintered into various factions and parties, among others led by Tan Malaka and Musso. A Musso-led uprising called the Madiun Affair took place on 18 September 1948 and communists seemed to be on the run for a while before reorganizing in 1950. *Taufan merah* came out a year before another push back against communists led by then Premier Sukiman Wirjosandjojo which occurred in August 1951.
in 2001. The novel has been praised by scholars as the most important work of the Sino-Malay literature, even if written under extreme political constraints and formulated somewhat opportunistically ‘to create sensation’. The republication of Drama represents some kind of a full circle in the history of Indonesia’s proletarian literature, which peaked sometime between the 1950s and the 1960s, embodied by Lekra.\textsuperscript{38} Its relative distinction today is a reminder of the previous political order in Indonesia that was hostile to communism, and of the nation’s communist past that remains to be reconciled with. Still in 2003 Koloni pengucilan Boven Digoel (Suwardi 2003:viii) seems to echo Kwee, noting that many of the internees were victims of misinformation, ‘Most of them were provoked by PKI without truly understanding what communism really meant’.

Another question worth asking is: what is the role of Chinese authors such as Kwee, Liem, and Njoo in the historical reconstruction of the proletarian movement in Indonesia? Put in broader terms, what does Sino-Malay literature have to offer with regard to Indonesian historiography? The most obvious point is that Sino-Malay literature remains an understudied field and a vast archival vault that is largely untapped. Historical inquiries on the 1920s communist movement and the Digoel experience have largely neglected these Chinese sources and dismissed them as irrelevant. This is even as the literary production by Indies Chinese far outnumbered those by the colonial state publishing house (Balai Poestaka) and by independent publishers of indigenous Indonesians combined. As the single largest producer of literary works, Balai Poestaka has little to offer in this regard; its writers were too constricted by government politics to write about communism or Boven Digoel. The Chinese writers on the other hand had more liberty to write about politically sensitive matters, including the communist revolt, even if they had to absolve the government of blame, as Liem did in \textit{Merah}. In addition, some Chinese writers were remarkably progressive. Liem’s attention to factory workers in \textit{Merah} was quite rare in its time. Decades of communist phobia during the New Order period (1967-1998) have left Indonesians with a deficient and distorted view of the communist activists in the nation’s history. All available sources must be exhausted.

\textsuperscript{38} On Lekra, see Foulcher 1986.
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