
The author, Esther Kuntjara, is Chinese Indonesian herself, a woman who, in her mid fifties, conducted her research and fieldwork and obtained her Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Linguistics from Indiana University of Pennsylvania in 2001. Years later and living in Surabaya again, she locates a small German publisher who agrees to distribute the book version of her thesis through print on demand.

The author of this 164 pages book [be warned: the letter type is tiny!] set out to gather data to analyse and interpret selected speech acts of Chinese women in the Surabaya area. The choice of this particular subject matter should make this publication a relevant one, since no Malay/Indonesian variant ever coined by speakers of Chinese descent has attracted much scholarly attention as yet. Also Chinese Indonesian women form more or less a blank spot on the research map of Southeast Asian Studies. Applying common academic standards, the book under discussion has, admittedly, a number of shortcomings.

The book is divided into six chapters. As usual chapter one gives the background and purpose of the study, research questions and the conceptual framework. Chapter two discusses related literature, including the historical background of the Chinese in Indonesia and a brief comparison of the concept of politeness in Chinese and Javanese culture. Chapter three gives an exhaustive description of the search and selection process that eventually led to the choice of the four candidates/informants. The chapter closes with a very brief self-reflection on the role of the researcher and the methodology applied. Chapter four focuses on the author’s observations, her

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interaction with the two mothers and daughters, and the interviews that she held over a period of several weeks in 2000. This chapter is divided in subchapters, each focussing on one woman at a time. In the subsequent chapter Kuntjara discusses the results in a comparative approach within a linguistic framework. The speech acts are divided into terms of address, compliments and their responses, requests and their responses, appreciation and gratitude, and apologies. The last chapter briefly reflects on both her research approach and the results of her research, emphasizing desirable continuation of research in this field.

Applying the qualitative research method, Kuntjara follows two Chinese Indonesian mother-daughter pairs in their everyday life interaction. While one mother had a Dutch educational background, the other had a Chinese education. In her analysis the author primarily focuses on the inter-ethnic aspects, almost avoiding gender-related issues, despite her declared goal of making the “voice of those silent Chinese Indonesian women be heard” (foreword, no page). In her depiction of the women’s everyday life, however, those gender aspects slip in, never explicitly stated but inconspicuously captured in small scenes and gestures, in the marginally touched-upon relations between siblings or in-laws, in the once, but no longer present husbands. The reader definitely learns about speech acts and politeness, and for linguistically interested non-Indonesianists the book certainly provides a lot of useful information on language use. On a different level it sketches a fascinating picture of four Chinese Indonesian women in present day Indonesia. They represent two generations of cultural assimilation, and Esther Kuntjara belongs to one of them – a fact that she is aware of and painfully attempting to suppress throughout her book, in order to act as an objective, a ‘good’ scholar. It is her struggle, too, that got documented in this book, unintentionally, almost as a subtext, her struggle as a woman, as a Chinese Indonesian, and as a non-Western scholar in a Western dominated research world.

It is to regret that this book has admittedly a certain number of shortcomings that could have been easily avoided. One may remark that the literature selection appears to be overly focused on Western literature, but does not include Claudine Salmon’s publications on Sino-Malay literature and hardly any post-2000 publications. In this context it is striking that the author, a native speaker of Indonesian herself, turns to J. J. Errington to help her back up general observations regarding the use of terms of address in Indonesian (p. 90). Turning to the content, it is to state that the author uses significant terms without providing a proper definition or clarifying her own understanding of them; a point in case being the controversial concepts signified by the terms totok and peranakan that the author uses uncritically throughout the book. Furthermore, one might wonder if a study can indeed be representative of the linguistic features of the majority of Chinese Indonesian women in Surabaya when being limited to only two pairs of speakers (mother and daughter respectively) as case studies.

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Archipel 82, Paris, 2011