

A BIOGRAPHY THAT HUMANIZES ITS SUBJECT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE BIOGRAPHY OF HISTORIAN ONGHOKHAM

DAVID REEVE, *TETAP MENJADI ONGHOKHAM, SEJARAH SEORANG SEJARAWAN*

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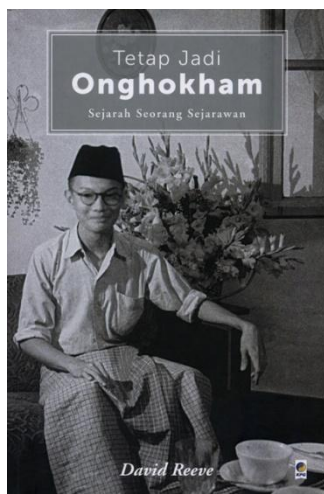
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BOOK REVIEW

David Reeve, *Tetap Menjadi Onghokham, Sejarah Seorang Sejarawan*. Trans. by Iskandar P Nugraha, Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2024, 564 Halaman. ISBN. 9786231342461. Prices: 138,750 RPS (Soft Cover)



It is unlikely that historian or any student specializing in Indonesian history is unfamiliar with the figure of Onghokham (born May 1, 1933, and deceased in 2007 due to a stroke). Affectionately known as Pak Ong, he was a distinguished historian from the University of Indonesia, whose works have become seminal references for the study of Indonesian history both in Indonesia and overseas. Onghokham's scholarly contributions are remarkably diverse, encompassing topics such as the Chinese Peranakan community, the history of colonial-era Java in the 19th century, marginalized groups, history of food, arts, sexuality, as well as history of mysticism. Onghokham was also recognized as a public intellectual and a celebrity chef. During his life, he actively engaged in various debates and discussions on contemporary politics.

However, public discourse often fixates on his eccentricities rather than his intellectual prowess. The prevailing image includes negative attributes such as atheism, alcoholism, homosexuality, hedonism, indiscipline, poor teaching skills, and misogyny. After reading this comprehensive and detailed biography of Onghokham, it is difficult to imagine the landscape of Indonesian historiography if 'remaining Onghokham' had not been a steadfast principle he upheld until the end of his life.

Onghokham's multi-marginal background appears to have shaped his unique and distinct personality compared to most people.

This is the Indonesian translation of the biography of Onghokham, originally titled "To Remain Myself: The History of Onghokham"¹, David Reeve, a famous Indonesianist and historian from University of New South Wales illustrates the strong interconnection between Onghokham's inner and professional life, which substantially contributed to the study of Indonesian history and historiography. Throughout his life, Onghokham grappled with issues of identity and his role as a public intellectual. At Onghokham's own request, Reeve candidly addresses Ong's struggles, including mental health issues, imprisonment (March-September 1966), and his identity as a homosexual. This biography reveals previously unknown aspects of Onghokham's personal life.

In almost every chapter of analysis in this book, the author often prefaced with the phrase, "not many people realize that Ong...", indicating the wealth of new information that dispels various myths and inaccuracies about him. Reeve employs primary sources such as personal letters, interviews, and Onghokham's writings to present a nuanced portrayal of Onghokham. This humanistic approach and analysis of Onghokham's personal dimensions are essential for understanding the complexities of historical events related to his life, from childhood in the colonial era to the Post-Reformation era in 1998, and his final years.

The book is structured into ten parts, beginning with the rationale for writing Ong's biography. It is followed by an exploration of his personal life, career and Onghokham's legacy. In the initial chapters (pages 13-55), Reeve reconstructs histories related to Ong's life, uncovering rarely known historical nuances. He traces Onghokham's ancestral origins to the Sugar King Han Hoo Tong of Pasuruan and examines his interactions with various political and economic movements. Reeve discovers that aspects of Ong's life and personality significantly influenced his intellectual development.

Unlike other historians of his time, Onghokham explored new, unusual and diverse themes. His historiographical approach that was distinct from his contemporaries, often sparked controversy and debates, particularly as he aimed to dismantling old myths of Indonesian history. Utilizing a postcolonial perspective, he challenged dominant, unjust, non-inclusive, and uncritical nationalist narratives, advocating for marginalized groups to which he belonged. Onghokham's interests spanned a wide range of historical themes, including colonial-era history, 19th-century Javanese history, Chinese Peranakan history, and contemporary political histories. As demonstrated by Reeve, all these interests are intricately linked to Onghokham's personal struggles. (check particularly the discussion on pages 251-264).

Onghokham's scholarship addressed biases deeply embedded in Indonesian historiography. As a Chinese Peranakan and a homosexual, his life was surrounded

¹ David Reeve, *To Remain Myself: The History of Onghokham*, (Singapore: NUS Press [ASAA Southeast Asia Publications Series], 2022).

by marginalized groups. Ong championed the voices and rights of the oppressed, striving to correct stereotypes and misrepresentations of 'wong cilik' or common people, those workers/laborers and peasants by revealing their active historical roles. His dual perspective as both an outsider and an insider enriched his honest and original approach, offering fresh insights into Indonesian history.

Ong Hokham actively disseminated his ideas through various public platforms such as newspapers, magazines as well as seminars and conferences, extending historical discourse beyond academic boundaries. This effort not only brought history to life but also positioned him as an alternative and more relevant thinker in historical and political discourse. For these efforts, he then received criticism for his different perspective. Despite facing criticism, Ong remained steadfast in his convictions, supporting his arguments with data and historical anecdotes. He is perhaps one of the few public intellectuals and Indonesian historians who dared to remain true to himself, despite the serious implications for his life and his academic career (pages 361-365).

Through this biography, Reeve demonstrates that despite living with multiple minority statuses, limitations, and significant challenges, an individual can find a path to success without compromising personal principles. This book delineates the various phases Ong Hokham experienced in his pursuit of interests and career. His passion for history was ignited in high school, largely due to Brother Rosario, his history teacher, who inspired and nurtured Ong's strong historical imagination (p. 106). Following his release from prison during his college years, Ong Hokham received a scholarship and earned a doctoral degree from Yale University in the United States, with a dissertation titled "Residency of Madiun: Priyayi and Peasant in the Nineteenth Century" (1975).²

His life was vibrant, marked by efforts to build friendships through social networks with both domestic and international figures, and to foster his self-confidence. Ong Hokham's popularity extended beyond the academic sphere, allowing him to enter the mass media, which significantly promoted him as a historian and public figure. It is important to acknowledge the numerous individuals who assisted him in reaching the pinnacle of his career as a distinguished historian and public figure. Notable figures such as Professor Bill Skinner, Ruth McVey, Ben Anderson, and PK Ojong and many more provided intellectual stimulation to the young Ong Hokham. Despite his ability to interpret contemporary situations from a historical perspective, his writings often required refinement before publication. His brilliant articles in *Tempo* or *Prisma* were known edited by the main editors, Goenawan Mohamad and Daniel Dhakidae. These individuals, among others, played crucial roles behind the scenes, transforming his controversial yet disorganized thoughts into sharp, engaging, novel pieces that captivated public interest.

Reeve identifies ten key characteristics of Ong Hokham's writings that are essential for historians to understand. These include rich in data, facts and details;

² Ong Hokham, "The Residency of Madiun: Priyayi and Peasant in the Nineteenth Century", PhD thesis, Yale University, 1975. For the Indonesian translation, see, Ong Hokham, *Madiun dalam kemelut sejarah: Priyayi dan petani di keresidenan Madiun abad XIX* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 2018; rev. ed. 2019).

interdisciplinary; comparative; demanding explanatory socio-economic factors; history from below; an empathy for the underdog and the marginal; finding rational causes in apparently exotic beliefs; contrasting outside and inside accounts of the phenomenon; and an emphasis on history as lived by individuals; a dialogue with sources and use of the historical imagination. (p. 388).

The biography situates all aspects of Onghokham's life within the context of Indonesian history and culture, facilitating a deep understanding and the emergence of new perspectives. When discussing Onghokham's childhood and family background, the author contextualizes it within the broad Chinese Peranakan history. When detailing his life during the Japanese Occupation and the Revolution, the author utilizes Ong's bachelor thesis as a reference, providing context and deeper historical explanations. This book also equipped with in-depth analyses of histories previously discussed by Onghokham, including the concept of *Mooi Indie* (Beautiful Indies), the important figure of President Soekarno and some overlooked histories such as sexualities or even *tuyul* (Javanese mythical creatures). Moreover, it also addresses the history of Indonesian independence, debates on methodology and historical writing, the application of historical theory, and more. This biography therefore is an essential reference for historians seeking to understand Onghokham's works and thoughts, offering new approaches to studying the past.

It can be concluded that this publication is important not only for its comprehensive and profound presentation of Onghokham's biography but also as a significant new reference for historians in Indonesia. Each paragraph of this book reveals the vast, rich, and interconnected nature of Indonesian history. Onghokham's pioneering efforts open the door to new themes and ideas for a new generation of Indonesian historians. It is no wonder, therefore, that Sydney University's historian Adrian Vickers considers this book the most important recent publication on Indonesian history. It intertwines biography with four distinct types of historical writing: Chinese Peranakan history, the history of homosexuality in 20th-century urban Java, a history of how Western knowledge of Indonesian history was constructed by Indonesian interlocutors, and a history of contemporary Indonesian historiography.³

For historians, students and even history enthusiasts interested in Onghokham historical themes, the complete list of his works (1958-2010) in the appendix (pages 442-466) is invaluable. This list showcases the various themes Onghokham pursued, some of which have become references for the study of Indonesian history. The chronological list serves a brief biography of Onghokham's intellectual journey, highlighting the expansion of his interests and critical historical studies.

This book serves as an exemplary model for biographers and historians willing to experiment with new approaches to writing biographies. As Reeve notes at the beginning of the book, biography writing in Indonesia often glorifies the subject,

³ Adrian Vickers, *To Remain Myself: The History of Onghokham*, by David Reeve, Singapore: NUS Press [ASAA Southeast Asia Publications Series], 2022, 352 pp, ISBN 9789813251595, *Journal of Society for Asian Humanities*, 54, (2024), 260-3.

resulting in the sanitization and concealment of historical facts. (p. 1). This publication convincingly demonstrates the potential of biographical narratives to elucidate broader historical themes when historians are willing to explore the intricacies of their subjects' lives. This book also exemplifies the intersection of national histories and the personal life of an Indonesian figure.

The author adeptly integrates elements of historical writing that are informative, imaginative, inspiring, and refreshing. He exemplifies the diligent work of a historian comparable to a detective uncovering previously unknown information, such as the imprisonment that contributed to Onghokham's mental disorder. His methods have the potential to inspire others to become better historians, encouraging them to delve deeper into the understanding and knowledge of previously unexplored history while studying biographical subjects.

Finally, an intriguing paragraph in the book states, "we can gain an understanding of Onghokham's historical writing through the books he wanted to write but never had the chance to." These include writings on the history of food, the history of the revolution from the perspective of Indonesians, the evaluation of Indonesian independence, the history of family structures, and the application of Javanese cultural history using the thoughts of French historian Fernand Braudel (pages 385-386).⁴ For Indonesian historians aiming to continue Onghokham's legacy, this book indeed opens up promising new areas for historical research.

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⁴ Braudel, Fernand, "The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II", trans. by Siân Reynolds, 2 vols (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).