

REVIEW

Mary Zurbuchen (ed.) *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present*, Singapore and Seattle, Singapore University Press, with University of Washington Press, 2005, 394pp. ISBN 9971-69-303-8.

THE PAST DECADE has witnessed a proliferation of studies on different aspects of memory and history. The increasing prominence of memory studies has coincided with a mounting recognition of the limits within which conventional historical accounts have been formulated. These trends seem to a great extent spawned by two aspirations: firstly, the need to allow space for people whose voices, for various but usually political reasons, have been muted; and, secondly, the importance of acknowledging the complexity of the memory/history relationship, while at the same time seeking out pathways through such complexity. To a great extent, *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present*, edited by Mary Zurbuchen, has successfully addressed the first, and taken some significant strides towards tackling the second of these forces.

This collection of essays offers a much needed and long-awaited contribution that fills an important gap in Indonesian and Southeast Asian studies, more generally. The fall of President Suharto in 1998 opened the floodgates to all manner of commentaries, newspaper accounts, and conference and seminars papers indicating the spirited efforts to remember, interrogate, and re-write the past. However, seven years later only a handful of serious studies in English (or Indonesian) have appeared so far in the form of MA or PhD theses, refereed journal articles or monographs. Given the fact Indonesia is one of only a handful of countries that have experienced killing on a genocidal scale and had to deal with the crisis of historical representation such killing provokes, one can only wish that there were many more. The field is particularly fertile for new seeds to germinate and grow.

Beginning to Remember consists of 15 articles written by Indonesian and foreign scholars, artists and poets/writers. It emanates from a conference on 'history and memory' held at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) in April 2001. While it is not unusual for such conference-proceedings-turned-into-a-book endeavours to be beset by problems of uneven quality and a lack of sustained focus, this volume suffers from no such pitfalls. A number of chapters are either truly gripping or deeply penetrating, while others are, at the least, engaging and sufficiently insightful to merit the effort of reading them. Moreover, the contributions cohere in presenting and/or dealing with the complexity of the memory-history interface, addressing many of the difficulties attendant in such an undertaking.

The conceptual relationship between history and memory is, to say the least, highly confusing. Pierre Nora is notable for having suggested a clear distinction between the two, the first being a more or less public or 'official' gesture, and the second, a personal one.¹ This distinction is useful insofar as it underscores the

disjuncture between, on one hand, what individual witnesses/participants in an event remember and, on another, what gets published or circulates in public as history. Beginning with Ki Tristuti Rachmadi's powerful autobiographical account of his sufferings under the New Order ('My Life as a Shadow Master Under Suharto'), the volume immediately seeks to emphasise this point. It is further reinforced in Degung Santikarma's 'Monument, Document and Mass Grave: The Politics of Representing Violence in Bali', a gripping narrative that includes a story of an individual whose painful memory of the 1965 killings is suppressed by the protocol of power relations in contemporary Indonesia. In both instances, the protagonists' remembering, in the face of overwhelming incentives or pressures to forget, serves as a form of resistance driving home the message that memory is not only a personal act, but in itself also a political one. However, such acts of remembering, as Santikarma reminds us, take place within a broader social and political matrix, making it untenable to uncritically accept a strictly dichotomous relationship between personal memory and public history.

Karen Strassler's essay, 'Material Witnesses: Photographs and the Making of *Reformasi* Memory', looks at the use and unrecognised misuse of photography as a 'witness to history.' It argues that the use of photography as authoritative evidence of history is at once empowering and limiting insofar as students' participation in the *Reformasi* movement is concerned. It empowers to the extent that photography cements the memory of students' active role in such a movement — a stark reminder to the current and future Indonesian leaders of what students can and in fact did do. On the other hand, the frozen character of photographs, if detached from the context in which they were captured, makes them liable to manipulation, a possibility often ignored by the students and general public alike. A major contribution of this chapter is that Strassler convincingly demonstrates some of the successful ways the state ideological apparatus has framed the student movement as part of the hegemonic New Order metanarrative of 'youth struggle.' Rather than a radical break from the past, an interpretation preferred by the students themselves, the State has emphasised the continuity with past youth struggle, thereby domesticating and denying the movement temporal specificity and historical agency. However, what weighs down an otherwise splendid analysis is Strassler's unstated assumptions about how things should have been. When she refers to the 'failure' of the students to 'grapple in a profound way with the historical... construction of their own movement', Strassler betrays her choice not to see the 'movement' through the myriad eyes of its participants. How each student chooses to use the photographs as sites of memory is their own prerogative, a testament to individual power to inscribe in these photographs memories imbued with personal meanings. As Strassler herself emphasises, photographs are open-ended by nature; they have no predetermined effects, no fixed meanings. In prescribing what should have been, she imposes on the students her own preferred way of seeing or using the photographs.

Laurie Sears' 'The Persistence of Evil and the Impossibility of Truth in Goenawan Mohamad's *Kali*', offers a riveting commentary on both the text and performance of the opera. By unravelling, for the benefit of the uninitiated, the knots of semantic maze, and by explicating the opera within the broader historical and theoretical frame, Sears unlocks its subversive messages. Her contribution however goes beyond interpreting Goenawan's piece. By locating the open-ended character of

this capability for subversion — what she calls “the impossibility of truth” — within the theoretically informed frame of reference, she in effect lays down a benchmark for the analysis of sites of memory that, to me, aptly rejects the notion of ‘authenticity of space.’

In different ways then, the inspired, engaging and sometimes provocative contributions of Strassler and Sears point to the fluidity of meaning-formation as a very important starting point for understanding the relationship between memory and history, and, more specifically, its inherently contested character.

From there, *Beginning to Remember* moves on to address issues related to the formulation and consumption of ‘official’ and non-official histories, offers several notable examples of such contestations. Fadjar Thufail’s ‘Ninjas in the Narrative of the Local and National Violence in Post-Suharto Indonesia’ and Andi Bakti’s ‘Collective Memories of the Qahhar Movement’ raise the idea of a contested public sphere, while Gerry van Klinken’s ‘Battle for History after Suharto’ looks at both the context and ongoing efforts to define and re-define various Indonesian historiographies. Van Klinken’s analysis is, at once, comprehensive and penetrating. He demonstrates that there are in fact multiple Indonesian histories and efforts to present a unified picture reflect nothing more than the structure of power relations within the country.

Together, the efforts of Thufail, Bakti and van Klinken offer a forceful reaction to the monolithic and overbearing posture of the Suharto regime’s ‘official history.’ The contribution of Katharine McGregor in ‘Nugroho Notosusanto: Legacy of a Historian in the Service of an Authoritarian Regime’ approaches the same subject matter from a different angle, one that turns to how such ‘official history’ was formulated. Focusing on the figure of Nugroho Notosusanto, a chief architect of the Suharto regime’s historical engineering enterprise, McGregor weaves a compelling depiction of the man’s life as a means to answering questions about why Nugroho made the choices he did and why he was so devoted to the military.

Beginning to Remember also places strong emphasis on exploring the enactment of memory, reflected by the inclusion of several essays on the different sites of memories. Along with Strassler’s and Sears’ splendid analyses of photography and opera/poetry, respectively, the volume also includes a useful attempt by Klaus Schreiner to understand a specific monument, the *Lubang Buaya*, while Anthony Reid’s personal reflection on the rather uneventful commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War Two in Indonesia further reinforces the spatiality of memory.

Despite underscoring the entwined relationship between memory and history, and despite ascribing to memory a status on the same level as history, *Beginning to Remember* does not fail to remind us of the apparent dangers in such a move. In ‘Memory, Knowledge and Reform’, Daniel Lev makes a searing indictment of how the ‘distorted’ shape of the collective memory of the parliamentary democracy period hampers reform efforts in the present. He calls for the ‘cultivation of knowledge’ in cases where memory obviously fails, effectively placing memory in negative opposition to historical knowledge. Hendrik M.J. Maier’s ‘In Search of Memories’, reinforces Lev’s wariness about memory. Whereas most other articles in the volume celebrate memory’s fluidity as a potentially enabling characteristic, Maier sees in such fluidity precisely the problem that hinders an ‘appropriate’ or

'productive' consumption and construction of history. Both Maier and Lev, in short, uphold not just the distinction between history and memory, but the superiority of the first as the guardian that will ensure the sanity of the second. In doing so, they aptly demonstrate on-going debates about the 'proper' forms historical and memory studies should take, if indeed they are clearly distinguishable.

The volume comes to a close with an article by Paul van Zyl, 'Dealing with the Past: Reflection on South Africa, East Timor and Indonesia'. It compares the 'transitional justice' initiatives in the three countries, and while he argues that learning from other countries' experience would be beneficial, he also warns against uncritical adoption of any particular model without regards to local specificities. Alongside Zurbuchen's editorial introduction, this article helps tremendously in locating the 13 other topically-focused papers within the broader context of scholarship elsewhere in the field. It is to Zurbuchen's credit that *Beginning to Remember* achieves a suitable balance between depth, breadth, and unity amidst such an enormous diversity of views and approaches. It is this balance that helps make the volume a worthwhile and engrossing read, one that without doubt goes some way to filling a void not only in Indonesian studies, but also in Southeast Asian studies more generally.

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¹ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire', *Representations* 26 (1989), pp.7-24.