Case Study
Surabaya Memory: representing minority voices in the digital history of a city

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This paper explores the potential of digital heritage initiatives to be used to represent voices of minority groups in a society. The discussion explores the notion of significance and representation in archives, the biases caused by them, and how we can reduce them. The discussion uses the Indonesian Chinese minority and Surabaya Memory – a digital heritage initiative - as the case study.

Background

Surabaya Memory (SM)[1] is an online resource dedicated to capturing the heritage of Surabaya city in a digital format that can be accessed via the Internet. It was initiated in 2001 by Petra Christian University Library with the goal of digitally preserving the city's heritage, with

a view to promoting awareness and fostering appreciation among local communities of its heritage resources and communicating the importance of preserving the heritage of their communities. Initially, SM focused on digital documentation efforts, but has now grown to include a website, exhibitions, heritage walks, and other heritage-based leisure activities.

The programs and activities of SM have brought together people with similar interests in the appreciation of Surabaya's heritage. Interactions have emerged among people of various ethnic backgrounds which have revealed many important issues related to the heritage of the city's minorities that were previously not very well known to the general public. The issues raised by these documents, and the heritage resources that are now more accessible through SM, have the potential to cure the 'amnesia' suffered by the general public due to economic, social, and political reasons. This amnesia can perhaps easily be explained by the fact that history is often about the majority and winners, a fact Lloyd articulated by saying that 'the dominant paradigm and its culture and institutions ... define what is to be remembered, and how it will be remembered.'[2]

This paper explores the potentials of digitisation initiatives to give some kind of representation to the voices of a society's minority groups. In this paper, the focus will be on only one such minority group, the Chinese of Surabaya. However, the same approach could easily be applied to other minority groups in any society.

The Chinese of Indonesia

Indonesia is a vast archipelagic country inhabited by hundreds of ethnic groups. There are some that are considered to be 'foreign' since they do not have any indigenous land in the Indonesian archipelago.[3] They are people of Chinese, Indian, and Arabic background. Among these ethnicities, it is the Chinese that comprise the majority in numbers. Suryadinata has reinforced this assessment by observing that 'the notion of nationalism in Indonesia is constructed based on the concept of indigenism ... which defines the nation of Indonesia as belonging to the indigenous, ethnic groups with indigenous lands.'[4] Under this notion of nationalism, the Chinese, Indian, and Arabic peoples of Indonesia are relegated into the

category of 'foreign orientals'. This indigenism originated from Dutch colonialism, which had intentionally segregated the foreign orientals – especially the Chinese – from the indigenous population.

'During the New Order [regime], ... "ethnic conflict" was virtually synonymous with the "Chinese problem" and the disputes connected to it.'[5] The political turmoil in 1965 worsened the 'persecutions' of the Chinese. Persecution came in many forms including: the 'encouragement' to change Chinese names to 'indigenous' ones; the closing of schools using Mandarin as the language of instruction; the closing of Chinese newspapers; prohibition of Chinese characters and language in public; the closing of Chinese shops and businesses; an order to close down Confucian and Taoist temples in East Java and the island of Madura; and a presidential edict prohibiting public displays or expressions of Chinese religious rituals, festivals, and traditions.[6] The Chinese were also unofficially banned from participating fully in the army, the police, and the civil service[7] and in many other areas of public life. This effectively 'cornered' the Chinese into the economic sectors of Indonesia.

The reformation era in Indonesia that began in 1998 brought hope to the victims of persecution. The social unrests that happened in May 1998 caused another major catastrophe for the Chinese. Although victims of the unrests extended over ethnicities, it is widely believed that the Chinese were the target. This was apparent from the fact that the gang-raping that happened during the 13–15 May incidents occurred almost exclusively to Chinese women. On the positive side, the reformation era that followed has brought new hope and encouraging developments in regard to bringing the Chinese into the fold of the nation of Indonesia.

Silenced minority voices and social exclusion

> Archives are a hallmark of a civilized society. They document human experience and serve as civilization's collective memory. Preserved [historical] records transmit our cultural heritage from generation to generation ... [and] provide a sense of time and place and educate the citizenry about the role of the local community in a larger state and national context.[8]

In the above quote, Ham succeeds in hammering down one of the most important principles in the archival profession. Unfortunately, it is often still a fact that archives and archivists continue to be largely 'preoccupied with important people, the extraordinary as opposed to the ordinary', a tendency which has resulted in holdings which fail 'to be representative of the whole spectrum of peoples and communities which existed within society.'[9]

The failure in representing the whole spectrum of society in archives can simply be matters of priority. For instance, institutions often do not have infinite resources and are therefore not able to preserve everything. Decisions must be taken as to 'what is significant, and, consequently, whose interests are to be acknowledged, what documentary history is to be privileged, and whose history is to be marginalized or silenced.'[10] The failure can also be influenced by the political and social struggles of certain eras. During the New Order regime in Indonesia, all expressions of Chinese-ness were banned due to an unsubstantiated association of all things Chinese with communism. It is quite likely that so many archival materials related to the Chinese of Indonesia from this tumultuous period have now been lost due to intentional destructions, or hidden out of fear of being associated with communism. The fear and misunderstanding generated during this time has also caused most Chinese minority groups to shut themselves from the broader society, resulting in silenced minority (Chinese) voices.

Silenced minority voices can lead to social exclusion of the minorities from their society. The exclusion happens due to the lack or absence of discourses related to the minorities circulating in the public sphere and the 'disappearance' of the minorities' contributions to their society. This was the case with the Chinese of Indonesia during the New Order regime. 'Apolitical' and 'economic animals' were two of the most popular stigmas that were attributed to the Chinese.[11] The stigma emerged from the public perception – which was created and encouraged by the regime – that the Chinese had been absent from most areas of public life, except the economic sector. This perception – although largely unfounded – exacerbated discrimination against the Chinese. The general populace was encouraged to forget the contributions made by their Chinese brothers and sisters in the past, and to ignore the causes that silenced

Chinese voices within the broader society. Chinese-Indonesians have been excluded from their own society due to a collective amnesia which resulted from the silencing of voices from this minority.

This exclusion can be alleviated if there are sufficient discourses on Chinese minority issues – generated by scholars – that reach and are understood by the general public. The lack of historical records on the Chinese minority also serves to aggravate this situation, and may even be one of the main factors that created the condition in the first place. After all, as Ham has observed, 'society relies on scholars who use [historical] records to make the past relevant to the present.'[12]

Significance and representation

The UK's Policy Guidance on Social Inclusion has asserted that 'archives can play a significant role in tackling social exclusion.'[13] Although the guidance was made in the context of empowering minority groups in the UK, the concept can also be adopted in cases of silenced minority voices elsewhere. However, in their endeavours to compile 'a more balanced and representative record of society,'[14] archives usually face some obstacles. It is often the case that 'archives of ethnic organisations and individuals have been slow to find their way into the established national, local and special repositories.'[15] Adding to this fact, Grabowski has observed that 'the insularity of some communities may present a barrier to even the most determined activist archivists.' Attempting to deal with this fact, Grabowski suggested an approach involving 'intermediaries', which he defined as 'a person or persons respected within the group, interested in its history, and in sympathy with the needs and goals of the ethnic project.'[16]

The discussion has brought us back to the contradictory notion of significance and representation. Power relations and limited resources have influenced archivists in their decisions regarding what to keep and what to exclude. In this context archives have consciously assigned significance in available archival materials, which results in an unbalanced representation of any given society – especially the minority groups that do not yield bodies of records to form archives of their own. Lloyd identified two sources of biases in the assignment of significance. The first is the fact that 'the development of criteria [for

assigning significance] ... underlies the subjective positions and political interests of those charged with determining significance and thus privileges some memories over others.' Secondly, bias can also emerge from the fact that in 'assessing an item's value or worth to a community or a nation against a formulated set of criteria ... [the basic assumption is] that core values and beliefs about what is worth remembering are common to the diverse groups that constitute a society.'[17]

Representation is also loaded with biases. This is apparent in the case of Significance and Memory of the World (MOW), which acknowledged that 'judging what constitutes significant documentary heritage is an invidious, arguable and not necessarily conventional process.' Although the remark was made in relation to and about significance, the same bias also pollutes the perspective of representation. The Australian Memory of the World Committee (AMWC) asked that if 'a case for its *significance* can be made for almost everything worth collecting ... should entire collections or libraries simply be entered on a *Memory of a the World* Register?'[18] The same question can be asked for representation. Borrowing from AMWC's words, we can ask the same question, that if a case for representativeness can be made for almost everything worth collecting (for the sake of representation) ... should the entire collections or libraries (of minority-related materials) be entered into the archives?

AMWC seems to have found a middle ground between significance and representation by involving 'the people who know [the archival materials in question] best.'[19] Johnston also suggested this approach when he said that 'perhaps it might be a better strategy for archives to employ people directly from within those communities they are seeking to document, allowing them to utilize their existing knowledge and connections.'[20] The author believes that this approach can also reduce the bias in assigning significance since the people within the community know best what is considered to be significant by and within their community.

Digital 'archives' and their roles in representing minority voices

SM as a digital library can be taken as being to some degree representative of minority voices among the people of Surabaya. This possibility

became apparent when the author met with various minority groups in Surabaya. The interactions raised awareness that the contributions of minority groups to their society are largely forgotten, or unknown to present generations. This has led to the idea of creating a sub-collection under SM, under the title 'The Chinese of Surabaya'. The collection will hold documents that represent the narratives of this minority, thus giving them voices in the broader context of the society they live in. While Liauw had argued on the role of digital libraries in the preservation of indigenous knowledge,[21] it is apparent that digital libraries' role can be expanded to include representation of minority voices.

Figure 1. The first private hospital in Surabaya, established by the Chinese of Surabaya. Adi Husada Foundation Photo Collection, used by permission

In carrying out this 'new' mission, digital libraries need to make some adjustments in accommodating this 'new breed' of digital resources that fall in between library and archival materials. They might not be archival materials in the traditional sense, which tend to be comprised of manuscripts. They might not be traditional library resources either, which tend to be published works contained in monolithic entities. The resources of these digital 'archives' will mostly be photographs, manuscripts, and unpublished or semi-published materials that circulated internally among members of minority groups which rarely made their way into public eyes.
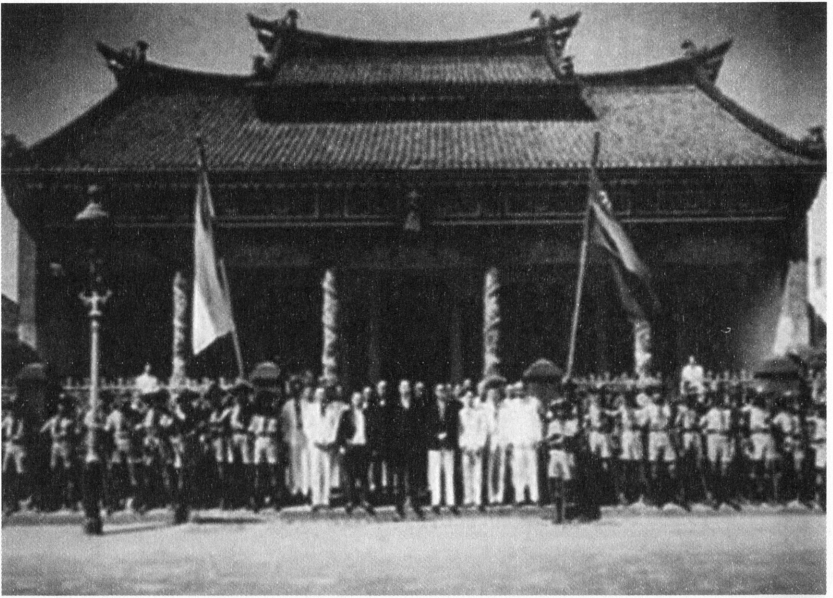
Figure 2. Boy scouts in front of the oldest Chinese temple (Boen Bio) in Surabaya.
Boen Bio Temple Photo Collection, used by permission

These materials can serve as 'medicine' for the society's collective 'amnesia' since they often provide evidence against the unsubstantiated stigma that the Chinese are merely 'economic animals' with no contributions in other areas of life. Some examples are old photographs that showed how the Chinese in Surabaya had contributed in the public health sector by establishing one of the first private hospitals in Surabaya. Chinese Indonesians were major contributors in the formative early years of the Indonesian press. They also played their parts in the development of the Boy Scout movement. Archival materials such as these can speak for themselves on behalf of the Chinese Indonesians to counter the propaganda perpetuated by the New Order regime to segregate the Chinese from mainstream society in Indonesia.

Archival materials such as these might also be available in established national, local and special repositories. However, due to the traditional nature of these institutions much of their whereabouts remain unknown to the general public. Digital heritage initiatives such as SM can play a

vital role in providing alternatives to traditional repositories since by nature they tend to be much more open and flexible. Their openness and flexibility are due to the utilisation of information technology, especially digital imaging, digital libraries, and the Internet.

Digital heritage initiatives such as SM can also be expanded to provide more social impact by incorporating onsite programs such as onsite exhibitions, community gatherings, heritage-based activities (heritage walks, educational games, competitions, and so on) that are designed to increase exposure of the archival materials to the general public, especially to the younger generation.

Figure 3. School children playing information scavenger game, finding information based on old photographs displayed at Surabaya Memory 2008 Photo Exhibition in a mall. Surabaya Memory Photo Collection, used by permission

Higher education institutions can play vital roles in this sector to create channels for minority voices. Approaches that are smaller in scope – as is evident in 'The Chinese of Surabaya' collection – may be able to compensate for the biases inherent in most of the established and larger scale approaches. The fact that these entities are digital will also

appeal to the younger generations, thus providing more exposure of their content to younger audiences in society, rather than only to a handful of (usually senior) researchers. This will help tremendously in delivering these digital archival resources to the general public. These digital documents, as Liauw has argued, 'will play important roles in preserving, at least digitally, local historical and cultural heritage, thus preserving the collective memory of local [minority] communities.'[22]

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has explored how social and political struggles in certain historical periods can silence minority voices. These acts of silencing can contribute to social exclusion. This paper has touched on subjects of significance and representation, and shown how each of these has practical biases that are difficult to eradicate. The author has proposed that to reduce biases in representing minority voices, archivists should involve people from within the minority group(s). These insiders have the connections and knowledge of what is considered to be significant within the group(s), and thereby avoid the biases associated with outsiders conducting this kind of effort. Lastly, digital libraries have potential to be utilised as digital archives that can represent minority voices.

Endnotes

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¹⁹   ibid.

²⁰   Johnston, 'Whose History is it Anyway?', p. 220.

²¹   Toong Tjiek Liauw, 'Desa Informasi – The Role of Digital Libraries in the Preservation and Dissemination of Indigenous Knowledge', *International Information and Library Review*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2006.

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