

Tan Khoen Swie: A Modernist and Developer of Javanese Cultural Literacy

Wisnu. (2023). *Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie Kediri: Agen Kebudayaan Jawa 1915—1963*. Jakarta: Elex Media Komputindo | ISBN 9786230047282 | 352 pages

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SUBJECT

Book review

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Abstract

Ethical politics in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia during the colonial period), since 1901, has also been the path to developing literacy and education in colonial Indonesia. The various groups supported education development, including the Theosophy group with a mission to strengthen Eastern culture. On the other hand, the development of education also gave birth to many private printing houses that published literary readings for students. During this period, Tan Khoen Swie played a dual role: entrepreneur, supporter of education, and observer of Javanese spirituality and culture. This 340-page book by Wisnu provides a detailed projection of the figure of Tan Khoen Swie and his thoughts, company, and dedication to publishing educational texts during the national movement to the Old Order.

This book provides an understanding of the role of *Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie* as the second-largest Javanese literary publishing media during the colonial era, its operational dynamics, and its bankruptcy after Indonesia's independence. Wisnu wrote the book chronologically since *Balai Poestaka*, a colonial government publisher, could not provide teaching materials for all people. Along with the massive development of people's libraries, the colonial government strictly permitted private publishers (including *Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie*) to publish reading materials. In the company's operations, *Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie* collaborated with several Javanese writers who had the same vision as the company. At the end of this book, several Javanese literary texts published by *Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie* are also explained, such as translated texts of Western Theosophists, Javanese horoscopes, numerology, spirituality, and other texts. During his time, Michael Tanzil published more textbooks for high school students and sold the books in several regions of Indonesia.

The word '*boekhandel*' literally means 'bookstore'. Initially, Tan Khoen Swie chose this name because opening a publishing business was economically and politically risky.

Many printing companies had various visions and strict censorship policies against political criticism (Farid & Razif, 2008; Handayani & Arifin, 2023; Maryono, 2021; Yamamoto, 2019). The label 'bookstore' made it more flexible to sell Balai Poestaka books, collaborate with other publishers and bookstores (see chapter four), and encourage the development of Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie after independence (see chapter five). However, the label '*boekhandel*' could not cover up its position as a publishing business unit because, in the 1920s, the government officials interrogated him regarding his publication entitled *Serat Darmagandul* as material for an anti-colonial lecture by a hajj in Ngadiluwih, Kediri.

In the opening of this book, Wisnu tells the outline of Tan Khoen Swie's journey as a 'peranakan' Chinese who cared about education and his struggle to manage a publishing business in addition to sales. Tan Khoen Swie is a young man with a high work ethic; initially, he was a bookseller and succeeded in becoming a printing entrepreneur and other business units. He was close to many groups, such as writers, entrepreneurs, booksellers, and Theosophy activists. After Tan Khoen Swie's death, Michael Tanzil (Tan Khoen Swie's third son) managed the company by developing modernization. Although he had dominated the publishing of Javanese Literature for the first six decades, this publisher closed after struggling for a decade due to the policies of the Old Order.

As the influence of the Surakarta palace on literary power faded, the process of literary production outside the palace involving educated writers and critics began to develop (Quinn, 1983; Ricklefs, 2018). Not long after, Balai Poestaka emerged, producing mass reading materials for people with a more modern variety (Suwondo & Mardianto, 2001). In chapter 2 of this book, Wisnu describes the duties and functions of Balai Poestaka in controlling book publishing in the didactic realm but anti-criticism of politics and Tan Khoen Swie's strategy in dealing with it. If Balai Poestaka published Javanese books with strict editorial rules and emphasized Latin script prose texts, then Tan Khoen Swie emphasized Javanese script texts targeting readers who had high loyalty to tradition (p. 61). Wisnu said, "*They are fanatical readers who have been formed since Tan Khoen Swie's books were circulated.*" In addition, Tan Khoen Swie prioritized the works of famous traditional Javanese literary writers at that time (Padmasusastra, R. Tanojo, and Mangoenwidjaja – this book also attached their photos) so that he was able to attract a readership segment among Javanese spiritual practitioners and low-ranking officials.

Chapter three of this book explains Tan Khoen Swie's journey in building his business and strong spiritual principles. Tan Khoen Swie was born in Wonogiri, a minor town subordinate to Surakarta on the south coast of Java, from a lower middle-class society. He had gone through difficult times in Surakarta, from working as a small boat rower and a labourer at the Sie Dhian Ho company. With his experience at the company, Tan Khoen Swie was able to open a small bookstore. Since childhood, he was a person who was reluctant to miss opportunities. Although a labourer, he often discussed with students in Surakarta. This habit later led him to become an influential Chinese figure in

East Java. In addition to having a publishing business, he also managed a vehicle spare parts business, gasoline, and a grocery store (pp. 116-117).

Sie Dhian Ho was a Dutch East Indies theosophy member based on data from Theosophie in Nederlandsch-Indie in 1916 (Nugraha, 2011), so he had a relationship network with Tan Khoen Swie and other theosophists. One of Tan Khoen Swie's thoughts was the concept of life ethics through three ways: *wet Manusia* by following the lessons of the prophets, *wet Negeri* by following state regulations, and *wet Alam* by following the laws of nature. Indirectly, Tan Khoen Swie's thoughts related to the development of theosophical nationalism at that time. Wisnu emphasized Tan Khoen Swie's role in the *Comite Kioe Kok Thwan* organization, a political community of ethnic Chinese who corresponded with the Chinese nationalist Sun Yat Sen (pp. 88-89). Tan Khoen Swie's statement can be proven in one of his publications, namely the *Kitab ABC dan Batjaan oentok Anak-anak jang Hendak Belajar Membatja dan Menoelis Bahasa Melajoe Hoeroef Olanda* (1929: 4), which contains a picture of the 'Prophet' Loo Tjoe and Khong Tjoe as well as writing that equates the era of change of Khong Tjoe and also appears in Sun Yat Sen.

Chapter four of this book explains the establishment of Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie as a means of representing economic ability, a means of promotion, and a network of writers and readers. Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie emphasized the principle of fairness in business with a wage standard according to the number of copies of the manuscript (p. 125). On average, the writers who joined Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie considered their economic welfare because Tan Khoen Swie had a vast network and respected contributors' copyrights. The sales strategy of Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie considered the applied value in society. If the manuscript is helpful and widely sought after, the publisher will calculate the price and size as minimally as possible. On average, Tan Khoen Swie's market was the bureaucratic *priyayi*; a few readers came from farmers or labourers (p. 139). They considered Tan Khoen Swie's works highly, so the authors 'competed' with each other to offer their works. As mentioned regarding the use of Javanese script in his publications, Tan Khoen Swie saw the influence of Western education on modern readers since 1936. Hence, printing began to use Latin script with Van Ophuijsen spelling (Latin spelling for Malay). Wisnu said that the number of publications from 1915 to 1936 is unknown. However, many Chinese and Javanese readers contacted Tan Khoen Swie to order books through letters to the editor. From 1936-1953, there were no Tan Khoen Swie publications. He struggled to face the influence of colonial policies and the change of power of the Dutch East Indies to the Japanese, who were more protective of literature.

Michael Tanzil reopened Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie in 1953 after Tan Khoen Swie's death. This graduate of the University of Chicago and Illinois Institute of Technology became familiar with the publishing world by working at the Associated Press and the world of photography. In chapter five, Wisnu explains how Tanzil built the business with modern mechanisms and the rise and fall of the business unit. Instead

of building the publishing industry climate inherited from his father, Tanzil began to 'free himself' from the shadow of his father's glory by changing the publisher's name to Interstars and creating publications in the scope of general knowledge and Indonesian literary texts. Unlike his father, who followed the spiritual movement, Tanzil reduced spiritual publications and prioritized academic books (pp. 165-167), targeting formal schools in several regions. The Sukarno government imprisoned him for selling Tan Khoen Swie's old publication entitled *Aji Asmaragama*, a Javanese sexology text featuring vulgar sexual scenes. The policy is still contrary to the censorship policy of the liberal era, which still used Dutch law to control public order (Jones, 2001).

Interstars has sound financial management by implementing credit payments from bookstores spread across 20 regions in Indonesia so that the administration is more organized and has clear financial journals and sales circulation. Rapid system changes impact product quality and quickly affect the fanatical reader class of Tan Khoen Swie. Even though Tanzil uses the brand 'Tan Khoen Swie' to maintain its influence on readers, the reader regrets the change because of Tanzil's unpreparedness to read new markets and old customers. Wisnu emphasized that Interstars' modernization could not improve the company's economic landscape because of Tanzil's high economic ego and lack of flexibility in viewing Indonesia's socio-political conditions.

Despite undergoing drastic changes before closing, Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie played a significant role in Indonesian education. Chapter six of this book explains the network of authors, publishers, and bookstores that improved the provision of teaching materials for schools. Booksellers played a role in distributing authors' works from author-publishers to readers. The authors of the Tanzil era came from academics, teachers, and education observers; on average, they were school teachers from various levels and regions in Indonesia. They offered social science and arithmetic manuscripts. To support marketing, Interstars collaborated mutually with other book publishers by ordering books from other publishers or selling products to other publishers. In addition to being a means of sales, this strategy effectively met the shortage of book references in each bookstore. The bookstores in various regions in Indonesia accept the Interstars product, mainly in art learning media.

Chapter seven of this book explains some of the published texts, ranging from those with a theosophical nuance to general knowledge. This product variation provides options to readers according to their preferences. Theosophical works mostly translate world Theosophical figures such as Annie Besant, Blavatsky, and others. In addition, Tan Khoen Swie also published classical literature by the King of Surakarta, such as *Serat Wedhatama* and *Serat Wulangreh*. After Indonesia's independence, this publisher also printed textbooks as teaching modules in several Java and other island schools.

In the end, Wisnu concluded that there were functional similarities between the Balai Poestaka and Boekhandel Tan Khoen Swie publishers. If government publishers had political nuances, private publishers tended to be economic. Although some readers said that Tan Khoen Swie emphasized the commercialization of literature more, he also

provided a space for Javanese-Chinese intercultural discourse, bridging the overly intense ethnic political turmoil.

This book is written in a flowing, neat, detailed language with minimal foreign terms so the general public can read it. In addition, the author also includes several illustrations of books and devices used in the publishing process. The author also attaches several tables and diagrams of numerical data regarding the development of the Tan Khoen Swie publishing business to visualize the descriptive data. Although it has a detailed explanation of the publishing process, this book is limited to Javanese literary works, especially during the colonial period. Although this book discusses the company's development in the Tanzil era and its publication, the writer does not explain in detail the produced literary works during the Tanzil era, including details of the political or non-political reasons for the company's bankruptcy.

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