

## **Rejection of Communist Ideology in Liem Khing Hoo's *Merah* (1937): An Examination via Genetic Structuralism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Merah* (1937) is a work of Chinese Malay literature that explores issues of communism through the story of a labour strike in Kudus. There have been different opinions regarding communism, and such diversity is embodied in different works. Among Peranakan Chinese themselves at the time, interest in communism was rather lukewarm. Amidst this condition, Liem Khing Hoo wrote a communism-related novel, and this signifies the writing's uniqueness. This research examined how Liem Khing Hoo's particular worldview of communism was applied and emerged within the literary work. Using the sociology of literature approach espoused in Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism, it was discovered that this literary work rejected communism. In addition, there were also no signs of efforts to eradicate class domination as the text strongly advocated for the humane treatment of labourers. Through this research, it is proven that Liem positions himself on the side of labour without aligning with communism and its mission of class eradication. Liem's rejection of communist ideology is homologous to the worldview of his ethnic group, Peranakan Chinese, implying that the labour movement does not perpetually contradict capitalism.

*Keywords:* Communism, genetic structuralism, labour, Liem Khing Hoo, *Merah*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Chinese Malay literature existed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Indies. According to Salmon (1985), there were 3005 Chinese Malay literary works written during the period. However, Chandra (2013) argued that among all these works, literature which discussed the issues of labour and communism was

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hard to find. Given that Chinese Malay literature was published during a time when the Indies were facing a labour movement and rising communist parties, the scarcity of literature exploring the two themes is certainly odd. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were three political views that dominated the discourse of Peranakan Chinese. A person would support either China, the Indies, or Indonesia (Suryadinata, 1984). On the other hand, supporters of labour movements and communism were not prevalent as they were perceived to cause more troubles during the period in which these issues did not have a stronghold (Suryadinata, 1994; Salmon, 1985).

The Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) attempted to make a revolution in 1926, but they were neutralized. After the revolution was completely neutralized, the government of the Indies took several steps to put end communism and its followers. About 1,308 people who were labelled dangerous yet ineligible to be prosecuted by the existing law were exiled to Boven Digul (Kahin, 1995; McVey, 2010).

One of the Chinese Malay works that discussed labour and communism was *Merah*, literature written by Liem Khing Hoo, which was published in 1937. Previously, Kwee Tek Hoay had also published work with communist references, titled *Drama dari Boven Digoel* (1928-1932). In 1950, Njoo Cheong Seng wrote *Taufan Gila*, a novel with similar themes. Compared to these two works, *Merah* only focuses on the issue of labour at the time. *Merah* was an interesting novel as it brought

forth the issues of labour and communism, two issues which were still sensitive at the time. The novel tells a story of a work stoppage by cigarette factory labourers in Kudus. The main protagonist is exiled to Boven Digul as an accused communist although he actually refused to join the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI).

Liem Khing Hoo was born in Wlingi, East Java, in 1905. He passed away in 1945 as a Kenpetai victim (Salmon, 2010). He had an experience as a chief editor, notably for *Tjerita Roman* magazine and subsequently *Liberty* magazine in 1934. Liem Khing Hoo was productive in writing prose such as romance and other short stories. Aside from his 16 romances that were published in *Tjerita Roman* between 1929 and 1940, he also wrote short stories, serials, and non-fiction for *Liberty* magazine in the 1930s. Liem was famous for his two pseudonyms, Romano and Justitia. Romano was his persona for publishing entertainment pieces, writing several short stories, and replying fan letters. On the other hand, Justitia was the name he used for writing columns on political and social conditions in the Indies. In the realm of Chinese Malay literature, Liem is known as a writer who frequently wrote ethnographic stories about the *bumiputra* communities. He never involved himself in partisan politics, but Liem supported the Chinese Indonesian Party, which argued that Peranakan Chinese had equal right to see the Indies as their home without having to convert from their religion or change their names in order to assimilate to the culture of *bumiputra* society (Susanto, 2015).

As *Merah* discussed the issues of labourers and communism despite the low interest in the ism among Peranakan Chinese, this research poses the question of how the writer's worldview on communism is related to aspects of labour and class. Thus far, there has not been sufficient research that examines the writer's worldview in *Merah*. Kasijanto (1992) focused his research on the representation of the cigarette industry within the literary work. He stated that *Merah* represented the society who shifting from agriculture to industry. Baetillah (2007) and Lestari (2016) examined the aristocratic elements in the writing, they found that Soebagija is a *priyayi* though he fought for the workers. Another research by Chandra (2013) examined *Merah* within the political context of 1926, arguing that *Merah* is Liem's effort to criticize capitalism without having to be framed as a supporter of the Communist Party.

Through connecting the writing's structures to each other (especially characters, writer, and the social context of the writing), this research expects to discover the writer's worldview. By examining the writer's worldview, an alternative perspective on labour movements within the period could be discovered.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research used sociology of literature, specifically Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism. The approach itself was selected due to its ability to identify a writer's worldview reflected through his or her writing(s). For Goldmann, writing is

not merely a result of individual creativity but rather a result of trans-individual mental structure within a social group (Eagleton, 1976). According to genetic structuralism, in order to understand a literary work, it is impossible to detach it from the contexts that shape the writing itself, and these contexts may be economic, social, or even political (Goldmann, 1980).

This approach also applies the terminology "worldview," which refers to a person's or a group's particular articulation (Goldman as cited in Boelhower, 1976). Worldviews must also be connected with relatively homogenous social groups that show homology in similar historical contexts. Therefore, worldviews contain human responses that are always coherent to a context. Such an understanding of genetic structuralism leads this research to focus on not only the literary work's social context but also the writer himself. As a writer becomes a part of a particular social group, a writer's views definitely reflect the perspectives of a particular social group to which he or she belongs.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Conflicts between Older and Younger Characters

*Merah* focuses on a work stoppage at the Koepoe Taroeng cigarette factory as its primary issue. As H. Zainal, the factory owner, made a regulation suspending the labourers' wage, the factory workers started a strike. The regulation itself was the right decision for H. Zainal, the antagonist. He said, "This brings good to our company.

Once these people get their wages, they will return to their own homes and refuse to work further” (p. 29).

H. Zainal expected that the wage suspension would not cause the workers to leave the factory. As long as the workers remained, the factory would remain stable. The factory’s stability is related to its cigarette production, which leads to the factory’s overall income. In the early 1920s, there was a shift in the cigarette business in Kudus, as the sector evolved from home industries to massive factories (Castles, 1982). The cigarette industry in Kudus was gradually developing, and this situation would be a reasonable explanation for H. Zainal to suspend the workers’ pay as a strategy to maintain the profitability of his company. However, the suspension certainly put the workers at a disadvantage.

The strategy was challenged by Soebagia (the novel’s author), H. Zainal’s to-be son-in-law who also worked for the factory. He expressed a different opinion regarding the matter, “Father, these people have their own freedom. And you cannot simply think that they have to be Koepoe Tarong factory workers for the rest of their lives.” (p.29).

For Soebagia, workers also have the right to choose their own destiny, whether they wish to keep working for H. Zainal’s factory or quit. Soebagia saw that the measures taken by H. Zainal to keep the workers were unethical as it violated the workers’ rights. Soebagia did not see the workers as factory owners’ handmaids.

H. Zainal and Soebagia represent two contradictory views of labour at the Koepoe Tarong factory. In line with Goldmann’s (1980) argument, a literary work cannot be detached from the social structure that puts the work into shape. The dichotomy of thoughts in the novel, then, is not far from the Dutch Ethical Policy that was implemented by the Indies government at the time. With its ethical policy and liberal mission, the Indies government was attempting to eradicate noblemen symbols of feudalism while planting the seeds of new hope for younger generations. This attempt was embodied in the establishment of high schools for *bumiputra* (Ricklefs, 1995). Furthermore, western education also brought progressive thinking to aristocrats who had the opportunity to be educated at the time.

H. Zainal is the representation of old groups who were still influenced by feudalistic patterns of thoughts. On the contrary, Soebagia is the representation of youths who were accustomed to more progressive ways of thinking. As an OSVIA (*Opleiding School Voor Inlandsche Ambtenaren*) graduate, schools for civil servants provided by the Indies government, Soebagia had certainly read many western books that opened his mind to the nature of labour. Western education inspired younger generations (particularly those who came from an upper-middle-class background) with fresh ideas (Yamamoto, 2011).

Through his attitude and perspective, Soebagia is apparently attempting to “fix” H. Zainal’s ways of treating the workers, and this is apparent from the following:

You have no malicious intent to deceive the workers. But what you have done has put them in a financially difficult situation, nor an intention to steal the wages they deserve. But you have not given them what they are owed. Now hundreds of these workers returned to their villages, begging [to the company] in spite of having worked for Koepoe Taroeng for years, in spite of having wages that are due. Such is a flawed way [of doing business]. We have gained our victory through away with a due. And now, the due is finally here. (Liem, 1937, p. 31).

Clearly affiliating himself to the labourers, Soebagia challenged H. Zainal's world of ideas and his actions against the workers of the factory. Nevertheless, Soebagia did not criticize H. Zainal as a person; his critiques were aimed more at his system of payment. He indirectly warned H. Zainal that workers would not let themselves submissively accept financial persecution at H. Zainal's hands

Soebagia's warning came true when impatient workers finally began a labour strike and started a second one when H. Zainal did not grant the workers' wishes on the first rally. When the second strike did not yield the expected result, the workers rallied in front of the Regent's office. The demonstration caused the Regent to call H. Zainal and ask him to conduct a dialogue with the workers, mediated by the Regent himself.

The text describes that the strike was a culmination point emerging from the resistance, disappointment, and repressions the workers experienced since their wages were suspended. The labour strike in the text uses a formula similar to real-life strikes during that period. Workers would initiate a strike when what their employer gave them did not meet their satisfaction. It seemed that workers at the time were beginning to understand industrial systems (Sandra, 2007), and this reinforced their ability to strike successfully.

It is important to note that the initiative to perform the strike came from the workers themselves. This notion was carried out when Karsiman, the workers' representative, relayed the issue to the local Regent:

“That is simply not true, my lord. All of us stop working because of our own willingness. No one provoked us. We only think that H. Zainal deceived us” (Liem, 1937, p. 46).

The workers in *Merah* were depicted as having the consciousness and strength to assert their rights. By emphasizing that the strike came from their own willingness, H. Zainal's view of labour as his minions has been debunked. Labourers are shown here to be a group of human beings capable of resisting when their rights are taken away from them. Such notion is in accordance to Marx and Engels' views, which argue that collective protest can be an indicator of class consciousness resulting from an economic contradiction between capital accumulation

on one side and proletarianization on the other (Saptari, 2013).

In the text, the workers successfully won their demands, which were protected and granted by the police. Consequently, H. Zainal had to pay the workers' wages that he had suspended for a long time. Witnessing the Koepoe Taroeng cigarette factory workers' victory, other cigarette factory workers joined them and formed a Cigarette Factory Labor Union.

With Koepoe Taroeng cigarette factory workers' victory, other labours who experienced the same problem directly formed a Union Labor and searched for a capable person to be their leader. And they unanimously chose Soebagia to lead them, for Soebagia's name has become popular among fellow workers. (Liem, 1937, p. 55).

From the quotation, it can be inferred that the Koepoe Taroeng cigarette factory worker's victory revived the consciousness and strengthened the courage of workers from other cigarette factories. The feeling of being equally shared by these cigarette factory workers fueled the establishment of the Cigarette Factory Worker Union, which became the manifestation of the workers' power to speak about their complaints to the factory owners.

The workers' success in gathering their power for their movement was not enough; they needed to choose a leader who did not come from their own kin. Soebagia came from an aristocratic background

but still sympathized with the workers' conditions, and workers saw him as their perfect representative. As he stood on the confluence between the workers and employers, Soebagia was expected to ably convey the workers' aspirations.

Referring back to Goldman's (1980) theory, literary treatment of a labour strike is strongly related to its social context. The occurrences within the story imitate the existing models of the work's contemporary real-world society. During that time, although there were strikes initiated by the Labor Union, there were also strikes that were in fact begun by the initiative of workers, an example of which being when sugar factory workers initiated a strike in 1919 (Shiraishi, 1997).

### **Rejection of Communist Ideologies in *Merah***

Soebagia's close relationship with the workers led to the accusation that he was someone who was "merah" (red). In the text, "merah" was a connotation for communist ideology proliferating in the Indies during the 1920s (McVey, 2010). Even though the performed labour strike was in line with Marx and Engels' thoughts, Soebagia rejected communist ideology and the "red" label attributed to him. This was proven by Soebagia's explanation to the Regent during the aftermath of the Communist Party's failed attempt at revolution.

"I shall ask you a question: Is it true that recently, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August, Moesa, the great leader of PKI paid a visit to your residence?"

“That is so, my lord.”

“And what was the purpose of his visit?”

“To persuade me to join his party.”

“And did you accept his invitation?”

“No, my lord.”

“Why?”

“Because I have no faith in taking part in such movement’s interests.”

(Liem, 1937, p. 84)

Moesa (Muso)’s visit to Soebagia’s residence became the Regent’s reason to exile Soebagia to Boven Digul. For him, because Muso was one and the same as PKI, his visit served as sufficient evidence that Soebagia was true “merah.” As noted earlier, after the failed communist revolution attempt at the end of 1926, the Indies government took several measures to eradicate followers of communism, one of which was to banish allegedly dangerous figures to Boven Digul (McVey, 2010).

Soebagia assertively refused to join PKI through his clear statement, “because I have no faith for taking part in such movement’s interests.” Such rejection stems from Soebagia’s views, which were different from PKI’s. This is an indication that while Soebagia understood communism he consciously rejected PKI’s existing ideology despite both of them similarly defending the labourers.

Underlying differences between PKI and Soebagia’s philosophy were explicitly explained by the character of the Regent’s

daughter, Tirtaningsih. She respected Soebagia’s position as the head of the Cigarette Factory Worker Union:

I do not concur with his beliefs, but I do respect his noble character and moral values. Besides, he isn’t one of the “reds” who seek conflict with the capital owners. The core of his belief is to protect the needs of the oppressed. (Liem, 1937, p. 77).

The above reveals the underlying ideological differences between Soebagia and PKI. Soebagia only wished to ensure that the workers receive their rights and live properly without any missions to end capitalism. On the other hand, PKI resisted against capital owners who created class inequality between the proletariat and the capitalists, their ultimate aim to erase capitalism.

Through the Cigarette Factory Labor Union, Soebagia struggled for the workers’ welfare. He demanded that employers treat workers in a more humane way.

“...just as the employers have the right to dismiss an employee, so does a worker deserves to walk away from his job assuming the work does not give him any satisfaction” (Liem, 1937, p. 60).

Soebagia did not demand the eradication of the class structure or fight against capitalists. He merely asserted that employers should think about the rights of their workers. To him, workers have authority over themselves. Workers are not

mere controllable “things” that belonged to employers; they have free will and the ability to quit their jobs. On the other hand, employers must exist so that labourers have access to jobs.

Meanwhile, communism aims for the eradication of the class gap, aiming toward the condition in which employers, workers (or maids), and profit-seeking become non-existent. As everything is based on cooperation, there would be neither political nor economic competition. There would be no such thing as responsibility or ownership. The only upheld law would custom. Jail, orphanage, and extorting government apparatus would be no more (McVey, 2010).

The time setting of *Merah* takes place between 1926 and 1927. During that period, PKI has gained victory over party hegemony in the Indies. Furthermore, PKI was the organizer of the Indies’ two greatest labour strikes, namely the *Pegadaian* (pawnshop) labour strike in 1922 and the railroad workers’ strike in 1923. After these incidents, labour strikes were constantly framed as the “red’s” parasitical activities attributed to PKI and labelled dangerous (Bloembergen, 2011).

At the end of 1926, PKI made a failed attempt at revolution. In the following year, the Indies government exterminated PKI by apprehending people suspected to be involved in the movement. It would be logical, then, if Soebagia’s support to the workers led to him being accused of being “merah” despite the fact that he was not a supporter of PKI.

### **Liem Khing Hoo’s Anticomunist Ideology in *Merah***

The characterization and social settings in Liem Khing Hoo’s *Merah* are both influenced by the writer’s background as a journalist. According to Goldmann, a literary work is strongly tied to its author as the structure within a work is not a pure idealistic creation created from reality. It is the author who creates the structure and even (unconsciously) puts it into existence (Boelhower, 1976).

Under the pseudonym Justitia, Liem wrote about a cigarette factory in Kudus (Justitia, 1933). Titled “*Tabaks-accijns*” [Tobacco tax], his writing criticized the imposition of the cigarette factory tax, which led small-scale cigarette factories into bankruptcy, surely adding to the number of unemployed. It is important to note that his alignment with the common people is conspicuous in this writing.

His writings display his sympathy for marginal voices. In *Merah*, he expressed his restlessness caused by the current bad economy into writing that took place in Kudus, a town that he understood well. He knew that most cigarette businesses in the town were run by *Santris*, hence H. Zainal’s appearance as the factory owner. The word “Haji” in the name was the marker of H. Zainal’s *Santri* origin. The fact that many cigarette factories were owned by *Santris* was also supported by Castles in his writings (Castles, 1980).

Soebagia’s appearance was also influenced by Liem Khing Hoo’s background. He was a young intellectual

Peranakan Chinese who was well acquainted with the youth culture at the time, which was overflowing with idealism. The writer's choice to present Soebagia's character this way also signified both the habits of a writer and the social structure that overshadowed the writer and influenced him to create this literary work (Goldman, 1980).

Liem had also written two columns in the 1932 edition of *Liberty* magazine, and his article contained opinions regarding Chinese Malay communities. His writing, titled "Manoesia-Oetama," emphasized the spirit of nobleness in order to become the ultimate human being (*manoesia oetama*) (Liem, 1932). What Liem intended by "nobleness" was measuring everything not merely from economic perspectives, but also from the side of humanity. Meanwhile, intended for youth readers, his other writing titled "Kasoekeran Pokohnja Berhasil" asserted the importance of learning from hard times (Liem, 1932). These two long pieces of his contain one particular recurring apparent notion, which is that youths are the only group of people who are capable of bringing the winds of change to the society, especially the Peranakan Chinese society. This idea persisted and shows up in *Merah* with the presentation of Soebagia as his protagonist, an intellectual nobleman. Liem's alignment to youths was apparently influenced by the current *zeitgeist*. *Merah* was published in 1937, a time when the spirit of nationalism was high. Figures who shared the limelight in politics were mostly youths from both *bumiputra* and Peranakan Chinese societies.

A year after the failed communist revolution in the Indies, Kwee Tek Hoay published a work discussing the issue of communism. However, Kwee did not focus his writing on the life of labourers and seemingly selected Boven Digul as the work's setting for the sake of sensationalism (Chandra, 2013). Contrary to Kwee, Liem's *Merah* focused on the life of labourers during the first decade in the aftermath of the failed communist revolution. Thus, *Merah* actually presented an issue whose sensitivity and degree of disturbance was already trivial to the colonial government. Had *Merah* been published not long after the communist rebellion, the issues of communism and the labour movement would have been highly sensitive as the government would see that everything related to the *bumiputra* Labor Union had the potential to turn into a political movement (Ingelson, 2015).

As a journalist who focused on the dynamics of the current situation, Liem had certainly paid attention to the development of communism in the Indies. In the year *Merah* was published, the Indies had just recovered from an economic depression, and poverty was then still ubiquitous. His restlessness about the issues facing marginal groups came through in *Merah*. Similar to Goldmann's theory (as cited in Boelhower, 1976), historical and social facts can be expressed through the individual sensitivity of a creator within his or her work.

The fact that Liem was a Peranakan Chinese while his protagonist Soebagia was depicted as a *bumiputra* aristocrat is odd in that Liem was deliberately presenting

a protagonist coming from a racial group different than his. One explanation that could be inferred is that Soebagia was Liem's effort to follow the existing convention within the literature at the time. At the time, it was more interesting to write about the life of an aristocrat compared to portraying a commoner's story. Kwee's *Drama di Boven Digoel* and Semaoen's *Hikajat Kadiroen* as *Merah*'s predecessors also used the same formula in depicting aristocratic protagonists (Chandra, 2013).

Liem Khing Hoo firmly rejected communist ideology in *Merah* realizing as he did that communism's ultimate goal was class eradication. On the contrary, his work did not espouse the eradication of the capital-based class. Labourers were still in need of employers in order to keep working. Liem rejected communism not only through *Merah* but also through his other novel, *Berdjoeang*, which tells the story of the formation of a new community in Borneo for the unemployed. Liem's second novel focused on the life of marginal groups while explicitly rejecting communist ideology through the characters and the narrator's dialogues.

Liem Khing Hoo's rejection of communist ideology is homologous to the attitude of Peranakan Chinese at the time. In fact, the number of Peranakan Chinese who joined the movement was insignificant. Peranakan Chinese did not give their support to the PKI rebellion as they predicted that their lives would be jeopardized if the communists took control of power in the Indies (Suryadinata, 1994).

Liem Khing Hoo's rejection of communism was the manifestation of his worldview, one that could not be detached from the social praxis in which he was involved (Goldman, 1980). Liem lived in a society which refused communism, and this affected his objective consciousness. In addition, despite using a *bumiputra* character within the text, Liem still imposed his consciousness as a Peranakan Chinese.

Previous researchers have found that generally, Peranakan Chinese communities rejected communism. Nevertheless, Peranakan journalists actively monitored the development of PKI in the Indies (Suryadinata, 2010). Liem similarly showed signs of rejection to communism in *Merah*. *Merah* is the result of his contemplation and worries for marginal societies. Once again, he supported labour movements and their demands for the humane treatment from their employers, but he still rejected the idea of class eradication. These two aspects could be seen as Liem's worldview regarding labourers and class.

Liem's knowledge of the development of communism in the Indies brought him to the realization that everything related to the labour movement, no matter how trivial, would be automatically linked to PKI. This is also closely related to the fact that during the early 1920s, there were many cases of labour strikes in the Indies (Ingelson, 2015). Amidst this situation, Liem expressed his criticism of communism and how the ideology sees the issues of labour through *Merah*. Whatever sort of labour movement was depicted in *Merah*, it was never based on the spirit of communism.

## CONCLUSION

Labourers in *Merah* were depicted as agents with the ability to speak their minds, the courage to assert their rights, and class consciousness. The workers' demands were met within the story, but in achieving their goal, they remained dependent on someone from a higher social class to lead their movement. Such a condition indicates that workers were still a marginal group. *Merah* does not espouse the extreme idea of class eradication and explicitly rejected the ideology of communism. The workers did not wish to wage a war with the capital owners. *Merah* certainly defends workers, but this does not necessarily mean that the work itself is a pro-communist text.

Liem's alignment with workers expressed in *Merah* is consistent with his other journalistic writings. Soebagia's depiction as a young idealist was coherent with the existing *zeitgeist* of the period. As a Peranakan Chinese, Liem perpetuated his kin's attitudes in rejecting communism. Liem never agrees to the eradication of the capitalist class. In fact, the class gap was preserved within the text, and the condition was interpreted as a necessity so that workers may remain employed. Liem's alignment to workers by demanding humane treatment from the employers could be interpreted as his own worldview. The labour movement presented in *Merah* is the embodiment of Liem Khing Hoo's alternative perspective, arguing that labour movements do not always base themselves on communism and therefore do not perpetually reject capitalism.

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