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When embarking upon the research for A Certain Age, historian Rudolf Mrázek envisioned quite a different book from the one he ended up writing. From 1992 to 2000, he interviewed over 70 Indonesian men and women who had lived through the changes from Dutch colonial rule to Japanese occupation to independence. He expected to hear first-hand accounts of great transformations: “the transition to modernity, from colonialism to postcolonialism . . . the failed (or unfinished) Indonesian revolution.” However, in the course of these dozens of meandering reminiscences, he “stumbled across a particular landscape” that came to move him intensely. Instead of a conventional narrative of modernization, he offers us a meditation on memory and its vagaries. In addition, by interweaving Indonesian memories with the insights of European avant-garde intellectuals such as Benjamin, Le Corbusier, and Proust, he invites us to reflect on the nature of modernity itself, to reconsider it from the perspective of a coloniality that he sees as often anticipating the metropole.

For this reviewer, even intruding while reading A Certain Age were flashbacks to the interviews in Curtis Levy’s documentary series Riding the Tiger (Australia, 1992) on modern Indonesian history; the series gathered reminiscences of the same time span from much the same type of eyewitness as appear in Mrázek’s book (indeed the very same eyewitnesses, in the case of Roeslan Abdulgani, Sukarno’s UN ambassador, and Father Mangunwijaya, the renowned author). Perhaps Mrázek at first intended to produce what would amount to an expansion in book form of the work of historical recovery that that documentary series was. However, while Riding the Tiger argues a clear thesis that Indonesia’s military dictatorship finds its origins in indigenous feudalism, Dutch colonialism, and Japanese militarism, A Certain Age by contrast merely suggests or proposes its theses or, better, simply raises questions. The open-ended, ambiguous nature of the work is reflected in the very title: what exactly does the author mean by the phrase “a certain age”? The late colonial era being recollected? The moment of recollecting itself, the last years of the Suharto regime and its immediate aftermath? The physical age of the interviewees themselves, in their seventies and eighties, that particular degree of distance from the world being recalled? Even, a late colonial age of seeming “certainties,” such as the apparent permanence of Dutch domination? The modifier “a certain . . .” itself alludes to imprecision, to the slipperiness of what one is trying to capture.

While the multivalent title does justice to the content of the book, the subtitle, “Colonial Jakarta Through the Memories of Its Intellectuals” hints at a narrower book than Mrázek actually provides. His interviewees recall provincial towns almost as much as Batavia/Jakarta itself; particularly prominent is not surprisingly Bandung, the “Paris of the East,” “more du jour than the metropolis,” but even the Boven Digoel prison camp on the New Guinea periphery appears. The term “Intellectuals” suggests that Indonesian equivalents of Benjamin and Adorno will be cited, but in fact the interviewees come from a wide range of occupational backgrounds: aristocrats, officials, generals, businessmen, even a bronccong songwriter (Gesang). The book also represents the ethnic diversity of the late colonial milieu, including Chinese Indonesians (e.g. Dr. Ong Hok Ham) and Arab Indonesians (e.g. Hamid Algadri) as well as Dutch who had “gone native” (e.g. Professor G.J. Resink whose family went back two centuries in the Indies and Poneke Prinsen who defected to the Indo-
nesian revolutionary forces). Perhaps the more catch-
all category “intelligentsia” would have been more
accurate than “intellectuals.” In any case, the interview-
ees, in sharing schooling in the Dutch language,
certainly constituted an “elite” within Indies society, no
matter how humble their individual circumstances may
actually have been (some interviewees, for instance,
speak of only wearing shoes to the classroom).

Mrázek organizes his inquiry into a tour of five
architectural loci: bypasses and flyovers; walls; fences;
classrooms; and windows. Like the individual Chinese
logographs around which Jonathan Spence builds his
chapters in The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci, these
loci give Mrázek the opportunity to talk about much
more than the loci themselves. He begins with the
freeways that tower over contemporary Jakarta, linking
office buildings, hotels, and megamalls into a web of
ultra-modern spaces floating above a sea of kampung,
traditional neighborhoods. Similarly, colonial modern-
ity created quarantined spaces, sealed off from the
“native” (might we not view the post-colonial as, not
the rejection, but the fulfillment of the colonial?). The
author then moves on to “the Walls,” actually not just
to the walls in themselves but to the intimate and not-
so-intimate spaces that they enclosed. In the former
category were the “pre-modern” washrooms where one
scooped water out of tanks to bathe. In the latter
category were the “salons,” the rooms for receiving
guests where the family’s modernity was on display
(including the very modern mini-museums of native
antiques and “exotica”). The following chapter, “The
Fences” is really more about the modern asphalt roads
on which the interviewees sped from their houses to
their schools, passing fence after fence, “overwhelmed
by the newness of the modern urban and the metropo-
itan,” “growing accustomed” (as Mrázek quotes
George Simmel putting it), “to continual abstractions,
to indifference towards that which is spatially closest
and to an intimate relationship to that which is spatially
far removed.”

The other pole of the interviewees’ childhood
existences was the classroom, the destination of their
daily commutes and the window on, and doorway to,
their destiny, as individuals and as post-colonial Indo-
nesians. The schools, despite themselves in all but the
expressly nationalist Taman Siswa and similar insti-
tutions, instilled discipline. This the interviewees
actually remember with warm gratitude — a discipline
that was so different from what one interviewee, Mr.
Hardjonegoro, describes as Javanese “dreaming” or
overindulgence in “feeling,” a discipline that was “like
learning to fly,” as another, former Air Marshal Omar
Dhani (imprisoned after the 1965 counter-coup) por-
trayed it. It was the colonial school that taught what
“freedom” was and produced the leaders that would
teach the nation how to be free, proclaiming the lesson
like teachers standing at the blackboard.

The tour culminates in a reflection on the Window,
actually more on paintings as windows and on painting-
making and painting-viewing as the calling into being
of new realities (a quintessential colonial act), whether
we are considering the colonial idylls of the “moosie
Indië” genre or the stirring propaganda posters of the
Japanese period. Considering windows, Mrázek asserts
as elsewhere that “colonies seemed to have been mod-
ern before the modern West truly happened.” This is
one of the most exciting theses in his whole book and
yet to prove it he would have had to resort to argument-
tation more grounded in precise chronology than his
lyrical, evocative technique provides. What Mrázek
does succeed in conveying through a flood of fragments
of conversations is the very “feel” of what it was like to
“become modern.”

(Andrew J. Abalahin · San Diego State University)

Vina A. Lanzona. Amazons of the Huk Rebellion:
Gender, Sex and Revolution in the Philippines.
Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009,
392p.

Vina Lanzona readjusts the historian’s lens when view-
ing the rebellion by the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas
(Communist Party of the Philippines, PKP) in the early