Abstract

This thesis is about the ways in which China is represented in certain contemporary popular discourses in Indonesia. I argue that the ways in which current developments in China are perceived in Indonesia are deeply related to how people see their own nation. Instead of viewing representations of China merely as the result of China’s soft power diplomacy, this thesis sees today’s enthusiasm for China as a reflection of grievances about the current condition of Indonesia and people’s hope for a better future.

Indonesians use ‘China’ to offer ideas for their nation’s future while criticizing the contemporary state of the government, work ethic, religiosity, and the position of Chinese Indonesians. This tendency stands in stark contrast with the previous way of understanding China in which China was seen as a less developed country and pictured as a communist threat to Indonesia’s national security. Today, only a few remnants of this image remain amid novel representations emphasizing China’s economic development, its global power, its religiosity, and its friendliness.

The thesis attempts to understand how and in which contexts this changing representation of China is taking place by drawing on interviews with Indonesian academics, businessmen, religious leaders, and
journalists. It also includes analyses of the recent flurry of written materials on China available in bookstores and on the Internet throughout Indonesia. Drawing on these data, the thesis shows how the representation of China fits into the concerns raised by different groups of people.