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Lauren McFalls
Northeastern University

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Examining cultural change in street art



A mural in Jakarta reads "Look in the mirror Jakarta!"
Photo by Doreen Lee

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Northeastern University professor Doreen Lee is examining broad social and political developments in Indonesia through a narrowed focus — street art.

Through graffiti and murals painted on bridges, buildings and other outside surfaces in major cities in Indonesia, the new **assistant professor of anthropology** is studying the emergence of new arenas for social and political commentary.

Indonesia has continued to transform itself following the political uprisings of the late 1990s and the establishment of a democratic republic, said Lee. Street art can provide evidence of this political change and the general mood of the country.

Lee, who lived in Jakarta in the 1980s and '90s during Suharto's dictatorship, said she always wondered what would happen when the government toppled. After it did in 1998, political movements proliferated throughout the region — not just in Indonesia, but also in Malaysia, Thailand and in other Southeast Asian countries. "It looked like an entire region was going through a political transformation," she said.

Lee's interest in street art grew out of her Ph.D. dissertation, which she plans to publish in book form, about student political movements in Indonesia from the late 1990s to the present.

The activists came from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, from engineering to the arts. They used performance art, street theater, giant puppets and hand-painted banners to add visual impact to political demonstrations, Lee said.

The connection between her dissertation and her second project on street art lies in the way artists today imagine their ties to the political movements of 1998 as one of inheritance. "The social changes of 1998 enabled them to have freedom of (artistic) expression, as well as the ability to approach more political subjects in their artwork," she said.

"You can think of this as the formation of a new public culture that's materializing after a period of political transformation," Lee said. "Now as things are settling and there is a new democratic regime, what are people interested in? What are they curious about? Are they making life more enjoyable or rich or looking to traditions or looking to outside influences?"

She's found some of the art to be political, some to be exploratory or "art for art's sake," said Lee. But she's also noted "recognizable" international influences, giving graffiti in Jakarta a striking resemblance to graffiti in New York City or elsewhere around the world.

The significance of this resemblance is one of acknowledging and assessing global connections and influences, she said.

"Studying the growth of street art and the new art markets in the region is a way to study global processes beyond the usual realms of economy, politics and mass commodities."

For more information, please contact Lauren McFalls at 617-373-5460 or at l.mcfalls@neu.edu.

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