

JURNAL ILMIAH
AURORA
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Volume 1, Nomor 4, Oktober 2014

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OF THE MARGINALIZED

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CA BAU KAN: THE PROBLEMATIC CENTRALIZING OF THE MARGINALIZED

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ABSTRACT

This cultural studies analysis focuses on the portrayal of Chinese-Indonesians and their relation with native Indonesians (*pribumi*) in an Indonesian popular film, *Ca Bau Kan* (Nia Dinata, 2002). *Ca Bau Kan* is the first popular film in post-Soeharto regime era that makes the Chinese-Indonesians as the focal characters. In contrast, the year 1966 to 2001 witnessed the absence of Chinese-Indonesians as the focal characters in popular films, and when they appeared, their portrayal was insignificant and often exaggerated based on their stereotypes. Set in the 1930s to 1950s, *Ca Bau Kan* depicts the superior Chinese-Indonesians in contrast to their present position as the marginalized. The context of superiority here is related to their ability to express and voice themselves culturally and politically. Thus, it is interesting to analyze the film's depiction of the superior Chinese-Indonesians and to look at how it affects the contemporary situation of the Chinese-Indonesians, especially in its relation to their stereotypes. The analysis finds that the film's attempt to centralize the marginalized through the depiction of the superior Chinese-Indonesians in the past is problematic.

Keywords:

Chinese-Indonesians, stereotypes, marginalized, centralized

ABSTRAK

Analisis kajian budaya ini difokuskan pada penggambaran tokoh Indonesia keturunan Tionghoa dan hubungan mereka dengan orang-orang pribumi Indonesia dalam film populer Indonesia, Ca Bau Kan (Nia Dinata, 2002). Setelah kejatuhan Soeharto, Ca Bau Kan menjadi film populer Indonesia pertama yang menjadikan tokoh Indonesia keturunan Tionghoa sebagai karakter utama. Sebagai perbandingan, sejak tahun 1966 sampai dengan tahun 2001, tidak ada film populer Indonesia yang menjadikan tokoh Indonesia keturunan Tionghoa sebagai fokus utamanya, dan ketika muncul di layar lebar, mereka digambarkan sebagai tokoh yang tidak penting dan seringkali penggambarannya dilebih-lebihkan sesuai dengan stereotip mereka. Dengan mengambil latar waktu tahun 1930-an sampai dengan 1950-an, Ca Bau Kan menggambarkan tokoh Indonesia keturunan Tionghoa yang superior, kontras dengan posisi orang Indonesia keturunan Tionghoa saat ini. Konteks superior dalam analisis ini berkaitan dengan kesempatan bagi mereka saat itu untuk mengekspresikan dan menyuarakan diri secara budaya dan politik. Hal ini menyebabkan analisis penggambaran tokoh Indonesia keturunan Tionghoa yang superior dalam film ini sangat menarik untuk melihat bagaimana penggambaran tersebut mempengaruhi keadaan orang-orang Indonesia keturunan Tionghoa saat ini, terutama dalam kaitannya dengan stereotip yang melekat pada mereka. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa usaha film ini untuk menengahkan yang terpinggirkan lewat penggambaran tokoh Indonesia keturunan Tionghoa yang superior di masa lampau merupakan hal yang problematis.

Kata Kunci:

orang Indonesia keturunan Tionghoa, stereotypes, marjinalisasi, sentralisasi

INTRODUCTION

When talking about the Indonesian national cinema, the role of Chinese-Indonesians is very significant. Their contribution started with the first films to arrive in the Indies. "The first Indonesian-Chinese film was made by the Wong brothers, who had migrated to Bandung from Shanghai in 1928..." (Sen, 1994, p.15). The movie depicts a Chinese hero who helps the indigenous people. "This narrative model was on the retreat by the mid-1930s in the face of the increasing national consciousness among Indonesians, and by the 1940s seems to have disappeared completely" (Sen, 1994, p. 15). The opening citation above shows that the early Chinese-Indonesian filmmakers explored the ethnic relations between Chinese-Indonesians and the indigenous people despite the shallow, false or even exaggerated portrayal of both ethnicities. When the spirit of nationalism arose after the Independence, filmmakers gradually stopped producing such films. From the 1940s to early 2000, popular national films that depict ethnic relations do not seem to exist. This disappearance was partly caused by the strict government censorship of the kinds of movies that filmmakers could produce. Not until Soeharto's regime fell did the film about ethnic relations like *Ca Bau Kan* re-appeared.

Following the Reformation in 1998, the Indonesian film culture is marked by volatile reconfigurations in the relations of ethnicity. Chinese-Indonesians' culture re-emerged and officially was acknowledged by the government. *Ca Bau Kan* is the first Indonesian film to reconfigure and relive the long-abandoned "realistic" portrayal of Chinese-Indonesians after 32 years of "hibernation." The fragmented condition of Chinese-Indonesians living in certain periods as depicted in the film brings back, as Julien and Mercer (2002, p. 355) argues, "...the remythification of the colonial past..." which particularly relives the Dutch and Japanese colonial period as seen from the Chinese-Indonesians' perspective.

The paper specifically deals with the way the film depicts, empowers or reconstructs Chinese-Indonesians stereotypes and how the depiction affects the contemporary situation of Chinese-Indonesians, especially those who live in big cities. In the context of stereotypes, the media industry believes that, "...stereotyping results from the need to quickly convey information about characters and to instill in audiences expectations about characters' actions" (Casey, Casey, Calvert, French, & Lewis, 2002; Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003). This argument perhaps can explain the reason the film cannot escape stereotyping certain group of people, especially when it has to depict the ethnic Chinese at that time as accurately as possible. Stereotyping leads to prejudice, which, "...refers to beliefs, opinions and attitudes that are characterized by inflexibility, dogmatism and narrow-mindedness" (Bolaffi, 2003, p. 227). Pickering (2001, p. 4) in *Stereotyping: The politics of representation*, argues that stereotypes, "... are usually considered inaccurate because of the way they portray a social group or category as homogeneous. Certain forms of behavior, disposition or propensity

are isolated, taken out of context and attributed to everyone associated with a particular feature....” Even though the film cannot escape from stereotyping the Chinese-Indonesians’ characters, the film at the same time challenges this stereotyping by portraying the Chinese-Indonesians in the actual historical context and creating different characters of the Chinese-Indonesians who suffer from various kinds of conflict, thus generating a more heterogeneous depiction of them. The word stereotype, coined in 1798, “... referred to a plate cast from a mould of a surface of type” (Leyers, 1994, p. 9). While the term of stereotyping, according to Leyers (1994, p. 11) is, “... the process of applying a-stereotypical-judgment such as rendering these individuals interchangeable with other members of the category.”

The film’s struggle with the deeply-ingrained stereotypes of the Chinese-Indonesians is clearly seen through its cinematography and *mise-en-scene* (placing on stage). A thorough observation on those two aspects shows that the film, despite its effort to play down the stereotypes, is complicit in perpetuating the Chinese-Indonesians’ stereotypes that results from its attempt to centralize the marginalized (the contemporary Chinese-Indonesians). The result also reflects the complex inter-ethnicity relationship which cannot be simply reduced to dichotomic explanations.

In the context of Chinese-Indonesians’ stereotypes, they are seen as being exclusive, superior, and morally corrupt. Simon Bernice (1988, p. 40-1) in his thesis states that Chinese people are thought to hold some “...mysterious ingrained advantage or aptitudes in commercial activities...clannish and socially ‘aloof,’ segregating themselves in Chinese areas...clinging to China and its culture as their ‘ancestral homeland’ and having feelings of superiority.” These stereotypes are still very much alive today for many indigenous people. The stereotyping was re-enforced during the New Order regime and it perpetuates public opinions that the majority of Chinese-Indonesians are involved in corruption, collusion and nepotism in running their businesses.

The discussion of the Chinese-Indonesians’ position in their relation to native Indonesians has always been problematic due to the stereotyping issue. Ayu Windy Kinasih (2006, p. xviii) in *Identitas etnis Tionghoa di kota Solo* states that the Chinese-Indonesian ethnicity is often referred to as one that experiences the most problematic ethnicity interactions, compared to those of Arabs or Indians. She further states that the Chinese ethnic often becomes the target of discrimination or mass violence (Kinasih, 2006, p. xviii). There have been many instances in the history of Indonesia in which the Chinese-Indonesians became the scapegoat every time political or social tumults occurred.

Historically, the first Chinese people to visit Indonesia arrived more than a thousand years ago. Dawis argues that they were mostly traders and seamen (2005, p. 33) and according to Tan, many settled down for good to escape the binding bureaucracy of the Chinese Empire (1981, p. 2). Generally, the Chinese immigrants in Indonesia today can be divided into two groups: the *peranakan*, who married native women, developed their own culture, and no longer speak Chinese. Bernice states that they are well-aculturated to the new way of life

(1988, p.33). “The second group is the newly arrived Chinese immigrant community, called *Totoks*, did not want to assimilate, retained the use of Chinese language and wanted to keep their Indonesian born children within the *Totok* community” (Bernice, 1988, p. 33-4).

There is a widespread assumption that most Chinese-Indonesians are economically superior than most indigenous Indonesians. This assumption can be traced back in history, especially to the colonization period. “The upwardly mobile Chinese were less attracted to the indigenous society and more attracted toward the wealth and status of the colonial ruling class. This class structure was based on “racial stratification” with Dutch at the top, Chinese in the middle classes, and the indigenous Indonesian population in the lower strata” (Bernice, 1988, p. 34). The Dutch colonials’ “divide to rule” policy produced an aftereffect in the relation between Chinese-Indonesians and native Indonesians. “In the post-colonial period, the Chinese continued to be envied and vilified for their economic prowess; they are believed to control 70 percent of Indonesia’s private economic sector but make up only 3 percent of the 240 million people who reside in Indonesia” (Dawis, 2005, p. 17). Though the feeling was not as intense as it was before, the native people’s sentiment and envy towards them are latent, which makes the discussion of interethnic relations a touchy subject.

One consequence of this sentimentality is the marginalization of the Chinese-Indonesians. According to Bolaffi in *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity and Culture*, marginalization, “...refers to two main issues. The first issue is the significant reduction in involvement in society and the considerable loss of opportunities experienced by certain groups or individuals within a specific society...” (2003, p. 174). For years, Chinese-Indonesians have been denied from certain rights as citizens. The most obvious one is their exclusion from politics and government agencies especially during Soeharto’s regime. It is very difficult for a Chinese-Indonesian to sit in a government agency or become a governmental official. “When taken to extreme, this process results in people becoming dropouts or *clochards* and completely refusing the social values and ties of the society” (Bolaffi, 2003, p. 174). This is evident in the exclusive lives of Chinese-Indonesians, especially those in the urban areas. They withdraw themselves from the surroundings and choose to live semi-isolated and limit their interaction with the indigenous. This marginalization of a group is, “...usually characterized by social segregation...as well as by their underrepresentation in [certain] professions...” (Bolaffi, 2003, p. 174). The quotation offers one possible reason why Chinese-Indonesians prefer to live exclusively which relates to the social segregation and the limitation of working opportunities.

Politically, especially during Soeharto’s regime, Chinese-Indonesians barely had a voice as citizens. Ester Indahyani Jusuf, et.al. (2007, p. vii) states that racial discrimination happened in Indonesia long before Indonesia existed, and it still happens today. Efforts to differentiate, select, disallow or limit on the basis of one’s race or ethnicity are still apparent. The earliest Chinese political party was founded before WW II but did not last long, especially after the “racial antagonism resulting from the Communist Uprisings of 1926-27...” (Suryadinata, 1978, p. 46). During the early Soeharto’s reign, there was not any Chinese-

Indonesian in the government cabinet. Even today, few of them actively involve in the Indonesian Senate. Chinese-Indonesians activities seem to be limited to economic matters, and the Chinese-Indonesians themselves are either unconscious of or perhaps getting used to being socially and politically restrained.

DISCUSSION

Ca Bau Kan attempts to realistically re-trace the role of Chinese-Indonesians, especially during the last years of Dutch colonization to the beginning of Indonesian independence. Consequently, they are depicted as superior and dominant compared to those of the indigenous people. At the same time the film also showcases some significant cultural history of Chinese-Indonesians, particularly those who live in Java. The story employs flashback technique which opens with Giok Lan, a bi-ethnicity woman who searches for the truth about her indigenous mother, Tinung. Through the flashback, the film then centers the narrative on the character Tinung. After the death of her indigenous husband and miscarriage, Tinung, who lives in poverty, is encouraged to become a courtesan and serve rich Chinese men. In the course of her life as a courtesan, she becomes deeply involved with a Chinese businessman, Tan Peng Liang, who triggers a scandal when he has Tinung move in with his family. Peng Liang's Chinese wife is paralyzed and Peng Liang makes it an excuse to find another woman. Eventually, Peng Liang's life is ruined when his rivals, other Chinese businessmen, discredit him.

Even though one can see the film as merely a love story between two persons from different ethnicities, *Ca Bau Kan* offers a deeper issue on the relation between them. In the context of this relationship and based on the setting of time, the film centralizes the marginalized ethnic and at the same time decentralizes the indigenous Indonesians. This centralization of a specific ethnic group is risky due to a potential break-up or a possible deconstructive reading of the film. In addition, the film also shows an obvious attempt to bring forward the issue of ethnicity and inter-ethnic relations that have for many years been evaded for fear of raising the issue of SARA (*suku, agama, dan ras* = ethnicity, religion, and race).



Figure 1. Tan Peng Liang (Ferry Salim), right, is talking with the Dutch Police Commissioner (*Ca Bau Kan*, 2002).



Figure 2. Tinung (Lola Amaria) (*Ca Bau Kan*, 2002).

The film focuses on two contrasting characters: Tan Peng Liang, the Chinese-Indonesian male character (see figure 1), and Tinung, a native Indonesian female character (see figure 2). The plot explores the issue of ethnicity and ethnic relations that centered on these two characters. The most obvious centralization of the Chinese-Indonesians is done through the film cinematography and *mise-en-scene* (placing on stage). Visually, the Chinese-Indonesian characters are always centered in the frame with prominence and significance, supported by the props and costumes they wear (see figure 3). Their visual depiction is in contrast with the poor condition of the native Indonesian (see figure 4). Indeed, the centralized and superior depiction of the Chinese-Indonesians is historically accurate. During the Dutch colonial period, the Chinese-Indonesians were favored by the colonizers for their economic prowess and skills. Figure 1 also explicitly shows the contrast between the crowd as the background with Peng Liang and the police commissioner who are both in white shirts, signifying prominence and elegance.



Figure 3. Peng Liang's residence in Batavia (*Ca Bau Kan*, 2002).



Figure 4. Tinung's simple hut (*Ca Bau Kan*, 2002).

The native Indonesian characters are mostly decentralized in the frame, and when they occupy the center frame, they look insignificant as an anonymous crowd to be contrasted with the Chinese-Indonesians, as can be seen in figure 5 and 6. Some native Indonesian characters have an equal position but never higher than the Chinese-Indonesians. The only time the native Indonesian characters occupy a higher position than the Chinese-Indonesians is in the last part of the film which is set in the 1950s. In that particular part, native Indonesians take control of the government from the colonizers and position themselves as the authority.



Figure 5. The anonymous crowd of the native Indonesians (*Ca Bau Kan*, 2002).



Figure 6. The more elegant and colorful framing of the Chinese-Indonesian's characters (*Ca Bau Kan*, 2002).

The relationship between the two ethnics also emphasizes the superiority of Chinese-Indonesians at that time. To bring out this sense of superiority, the filmmaker invokes certain mannerisms of the Chinese-Indonesians which I argue lead to the construction of their stereotypes. The mannerisms that gradually transform into stereotypes include the Chinese-Indonesians as morally corrupt, socially aloof, exclusive, and superior. These mannerisms might be the basic distinctive quality of the early Chinese immigrants who were mostly merchants. Thus, they instinctively would focus on gaining as much profit as they could and building networks with those who could provide profits, in this case the Dutch colonizers. In the process, these mannerisms evolve into what we know now as their stereotypes.

Portrayal of Chinese-Indonesians as morally corrupt is apparent in the scene when Tan Peng Liang tries to bribe the Dutch police captain and some local journalists (see figure 7). Tan Peng Liang's excuse for his explicit bribery is a Chinese tradition of giving money in a red envelope (*hung bao*) as a sign of gratefulness, respect and appreciation. He argues that rejecting the gift means disrespecting the giver. This and another bribing scene clearly show through the film's cinematography. This Chinese tradition is exploited throughout the film which reinforces the corrupted stereotype of the Chinese businessmen. However, this stereotype is contested in another scene when Peng Liang gives the red envelopes to the poor and needy native Indonesians. Although there may be multi-interpretations on the scene, one has to agree that in a way, the scene flouts the superior consciousness of the minority, which contrasts with the lingering morally corrupt stereotype that prevails in other scenes. At the same time, the scene also reveals the "other side" of Peng Liang as a generous person which is a non-stereotypical nature of a Chinese-Indonesian.



Figure 7. Peng Liang bribes the police commissioner
(*Ca Bau Kan*, 2002).

The portrayal of the Chinese-Indonesians as an ethnic group close to the Dutch colonials clearly reveals superiority. There are scenes when they dine together in fancy restaurants, engaging in friendly dialogue, which native Indonesians would never experience. Trusted by the Dutch colonials, Chinese-Indonesians are only one class below the colonials. This portrayal reflects the history of Chinese-Indonesians' relationship with the Dutch that triggers envy and antipathy of the

native Indonesians. At the same time this portrayal re-enforces another stereotype: That Chinese-Indonesians have no sense of nationalism and only befriend those who can benefit them. The film then attempts to negate this stereotype in a scene when Peng Liang provides the Indonesian revolutionary fighters with weapons. His action reveals his nationalistic side and contradicts his past action. Moreover, he voluntarily does it and does not expect to gain profit from helping the indigenous fighters.

There are also a verbal jargon which appears to heighten the Chinese-Indonesians' superiority. In the first scene when Tinung is taken care of after a miscarriage, her aunt tells her to get acquainted with some *cukongs* who can pay her a lot of money if she lets them sleep with her. The word *cukong* is a corruption of a Hokkian word (*zhu gong*) which originally meant owner or boss and carries an aura of respect and power in contemporary society. Few contemporary Chinese-Indonesian businessmen would object if others referred to them as *cukong* because the term implies wealth and power. Nonetheless, historically the term has a negative overtone. In the 1950s, this word referred to Chinese-Indonesian businessmen involved in corruption, collusion and nepotism and so it perpetuates the stereotype of moral corruption.

Another distinctive quality of the Chinese-Indonesians at that time that transforms into a stereotype is being lustful and womanizers. I have pondered on this particular quality that seems to only degrade the female rather than uplift them. Not just one, but there are many scenes that show the Chinese-Indonesian characters' mistreatment of native Indonesian women. The scene where the *cukongs* pay native Indonesian women for sex is very disturbing, and clearly degrades both the Chinese-Indonesians and the native women. What is more, the principal male character, Peng Liang, is depicted as the epitome of the lustful male and a womanizer. Despite being a married man, he has affairs with two women, Tinung and a woman from Siam. His lustfulness is highlighted when he leaves his paralyzed wife for not being able to satisfy him sexually.

Such exploitation of women in that period by Chinese-Indonesians might be debatable. Referring to the history, such incidents might have happened based on the existence of the *ca bau kan*, or prostitutes, whose main customers were mostly the rich Chinese-Indonesians. In addition, the history of Chinese emigration to Indonesia shows that Chinese males were the first to arrive in Indonesia and they did not bring their families nor marry native women. Thus, they preferred the prostitutes to meet their biological needs. Nevertheless, this lustful stereotype is somehow disappearing today.

The lustful portrayal of the powerful Chinese-Indonesians is another example of a negative superiority. The powerful and rich Chinese-Indonesians were undoubtedly superior compared to the indigenous people. It is then difficult to see why this stereotype is exploited as an attempt to centralize the minority. However, I argue that feminism issue plays a part in this case. Nia Dinata, the filmmaker, is a known feminist, and through Tinung as the focal and stoic character, Nia emphasizes on Tinung's strength and resilience in the face of

difficulties. By contrasting the lustful and powerful Chinese-Indonesians with the character Tinung, her strength becomes more apparent. No matter how powerful and superior the protagonist is, Tinung is portrayed as physically and mentally much stronger than Peng Liang and other rich Chinese-Indonesians who have been with her. Moreover, Peng Liang's strong affection towards Tinung indirectly suggests that Tinung is in control as Peng Liang is willing to do anything for her. This situation is referred to as a "reversed superiority," and at the same time it also signifies the minority as a loyal, caring and gentle person which is manifested through the character Peng Liang.

The film continuously attempts to capture moments to put the ethnic minority up front. The characters are always put in the central frame and prominent with a distinguished appearance. In contrast, the native Indonesians almost always appear at the edge of the frame, under or behind the Chinese-Indonesian characters. When the native Indonesian characters occupy the center frame, they are depicted as an amorphous, insignificant crowd which seems to be out of place, to intensify the significance of Chinese-Indonesian characters. Moreover, the native Indonesians in the crowds are mostly children or old, unattractive people in simple and bland costumes that signify their low social and economical status (see figure 5). Only a few major native Indonesian characters share the same level of importance as the Chinese-Indonesian characters. However, their role is not as important as the Chinese-Indonesians characters. Throughout the film, almost 70% of the shots are of the Chinese-Indonesian characters and Tinung. The fact that this film focuses on the minority more or less becomes the reason the native Indonesians are belittled. Their role is limited to supplementing the major Chinese-Indonesian characters.

In the context of inter-ethnic relationship, the film is fairly accurate. During the colonial time, Chinese-Indonesians were always more privileged by the Dutch. Thus, their superiority over the indigenous is historically confirmed. This hierarchical relationship shifts during the Japanese occupation. Historically, the Japanese did not treat the Chinese-Indonesians as well as the Dutch. The Japanese actually casted off many Chinese-Indonesians, which most probably was caused by the war between the Japanese and the Chinese during World War II. The film reflects this significant shift when some native Indonesians characters get more important roles and central framing, together with the Chinese-Indonesian characters. However, the portrayal of Chinese-Indonesian characters during the Japanese occupation does not significantly change. They are still portrayed as wealthy and powerful people despite the closing of their businesses by the Japanese. Even though the film manages to bring the marginalized Chinese-Indonesians to the central by emphasizing their elegant and significant role in the history of Indonesia, the film fails to avoid the stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese-Indonesians.

CONCLUSION

The centralizing of the Chinese-Indonesians' characters is prominently seen through the cinematography and *mise-en-scene*. Chinese-Indonesians are

explicitly shown as more powerful and dominant. Paradoxically, their portrayals reinforce the centrality of the majority rather than ameliorate the marginalized. The perceived otherness and marginality of Chinese-Indonesians are still apparent. This film seems to be burdened with an inordinate pressure to voice the marginalized by bringing back the past when they are the superior, but the result seems to be more nostalgic than revealing something new, despite the film's effort to negate the stereotyping. Years of marginalization has delimited the capacity of films on ethnic minority as a cinematic discourse to speak in the public sphere. Julien and Mercer (2002, p. 357) underline this problem which they refer to as tokenism: "the very idea that a single film could 'speak for' an entire community of interests reinforces the perceived secondariness of that community," which what probably happens in the film. After 32 years of marginalization in the film industry, the ethnic minority finally has a chance to speak for themselves although the filmmaker is part of the majority. The film shows an honest and worth attempt to re-introduce the Chinese-Indonesians although it is not fully successful to generate a deeper understanding on the present Chinese-Indonesians' condition. The film detaches itself from the contemporary condition when it is set in the past.

I also noticed that film is trapped in a dichotomic depiction of the two groups of people as oppositions, which adds to the problem of centralizing the marginalized. On the one hand, the filmmaker attempts to "reconcile" the two groups of people through the character of Tinung that "bridges" the gap between them. On the other hand, Tinung's role as the buffer seems insufficient as the film positions her more as a particular unique individual which is separated from her group, and thus cannot be fully seen as a representative of the majority. Meanwhile Peng Liang, who seems to be portrayed differently from the other Chinese-Indonesians, fall into the same stereotypical trap. Regardless his heroic, romantic, and seemingly nationalistic actions, he does not radically change the audience's impression of the minority, although his character indeed provides a fresh look on a character from the minority group as the protagonist on a cinematic screen.

This research paper is just a glimpse of a much bigger issue on inter-ethnic relationships in Indonesia. A deep and thorough research on a larger scope of the Indonesian film industry would certainly provide a better comprehension on how the film industry positions itself in the conflicting site of the Indonesian inter-ethnic relationships. For better or worse, *Ca Bau Kan* has managed to bring back the issue of majority versus minority into the cinematic screen, and it is an effort worth of appreciation.

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