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The Role of Chinese-Indonesians in Indonesian National Cinema

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Abstract

This article explores the role of Chinese-Indonesians in the history of Indonesian National Cinema that began before Indonesia as a nation existed. Amidst the hardship due to the prevailing discrimination against them, Chinese-Indonesians play an important role in the development of the national cinema. This article will apply historical approach to reveal this role and as an addition, the state-centered approach is used to discuss the discrimination experienced by Chinese-Indonesians. The findings show that despite the ongoing discrimination and hardship, Chinese-Indonesians manage to maintain their important role in the growth of national cinema. The recent development shows that after having little or no place on screen, the face of Chinese-Indonesians as artists begins to re-appear on screen as part of the multiethnic face of Indonesia.

Keywords: Chinese-Indonesians, National cinema, historical approach, state-centered approach

Introduction

The earliest record of Chinese people arrived in Java island, East Indies (term used by the colonialists before Indonesia independence) was in the end of 13th century when soldiers of the Yuan dynasty embarked on military operation. These early voyagers were also believed to play a role in the birth of the largest kingdom in Java, Majapahit. They came to coalesce with Raden Wijaya to attack Singasari Kingdom under King Kertanegara which was accused of insulting the Kublai Khan's messenger. There were no exact historical records of how many soldiers coming to Java, but some history books agree that the numbers were between 5,000-20,000 people in 1,000 ships. Most of these soldiers were recruited from Fujian (Han people, Jiangxi and Huguang Province (Hui people). "They were shipped from the port city of Quanzhou in December 1292 and arrived in Java in January 1293." (Santosa, 2014, p. 4). Many of them settled in Java and mingled with the indigenous Javanese, making them the early Chinese immigrants in East Indies. There were more Chinese migrants who came later in the 13th-15th century, "...following the Admiral Cheng Ho's 'legendary' journeys" (Lan, 2017, p. 200).

Along the arrival of Dutch colonialists in the mid of 16th century, "...the Chinese communities [have] remained as a stable feature of the South East Asian [and Indonesian] political and economic community"

(Lan, 2017, p. 200). Most of the early immigrants were traders, thus they were seen as a threat to the Dutch colonialist "consumer market in native Indonesia" (Walujono, 2014, p. 6). This biased prejudice by the Dutch colonialists became the starting point of the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment. The Dutch colonialists intentionally put the Chinese-Indonesians in a higher position in regard of the power hierarchy of the colonization: the Dutch in the top, the Chinese-Indonesians in the middle, and the native/indigenous at the bottom. The Chinese-Indonesians play an intermediary roles between the colonialists and the native. As a result, economically the Chinese-Indonesians did better than the indigenous and this condition caused jealousy. At the same time, the colonialists who controlled the media regularly broadcasted anti-Chinese propaganda through the Dutch language newspapers. There were many attacks and violence against the Chinese immigrants during the Dutch colonialists era. This "divide and conquer" policy of the Dutch colonialists managed to keep the people of East Indies from uniting to fight the colonialists.

After the Dutch colonialists were expelled in the 1950s and the power was taken over by Indonesian intellectuals, there was competition between the Chinese immigrants and the emerging indigenous business. However, the anti-west Soekarno, the first Indonesian president, saw the practice of capitalism as "western evil" thus creating moral constraints among the indigenous in performing business seriously. At this point, the Chinese-Indonesians who continue their livelihood on trading were considered to be "the greedy" and it further strengthened the anti-Chinese sentiment among the indigenous.

The fast economic growth during Soeharto's era in the late 1960s to mid 1990s provided an unprecedented opportunities to the Chinese-Indonesians who have become an expert in trading, and they used this opportunity to get close to the powerful. Corruption, collusion and nepotism during the Soeharto era led to the birth of Chinese-Indonesians business tycoons whose business are still growing today. "While the ethnic Chinese comprise of only 1.2% of the total population in Indonesia, they dominate the economic sector and generally make up a large part of the economic elite" (Walujono, 2014, p.1). At the same time, the closeness of the Chinese-Indonesians tycoons to the state caused stronger resentment from the indigenous (*pribumi*) that culminated and broke as a tragic incident in May 1998 when Chinese-Indonesians and their business premises became the target of the angry mobs.

The anti-Chinese sentiment remains to this day albeit not as extreme as the May 1998 tragedy. The most obvious case is during the Jakarta's governor election in 2016 when one of the candidates, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok, a Chinese-Indonesians, had to face demonstrations over demonstrations due to his speech in one of his campaigns when he quoted a Qur'an verse and was accused of blasphemy. He finally had to spend two years in jail and just has recently been released in early January 2019. The anti-Chinese sentiment also occurred during the presidential election when one of the candidates, the present Indonesian president Joko Widodo, was accused of being a Chinese-descendent. Even though the fact is very clear that he is not, the event shows that many Indonesians are still easily led to believe in such hoax especially when it comes to issue related to Chinese-Indonesians.

Chinese-Indonesians' Role in Indonesian National Cinema

The role of Chinese immigrant in the field of entertainment did not begin with cinema, but through

theater, in particular the *wayang wong* (human wayang). *Wayang* is a term referred to shadow puppets which are played by a *dalang* (puppeteer), and *wayang* is a famous entertainment for common people in Indonesia and other countries in Asia (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Wayang performance
(Webadmin, 2018)

Wayang wong was played by human on a stage, just like a theater performance, the difference is that the act was usually taken from the wayang stories along with all the costumes and movements (see figure 2).



Figure 2. Human wayang performance
(Wayang Wong, 2018)

Based on a historical account, by the end of 19th century, a Chinese immigrant by the name of Gan Kam “...successfully provoke[s] the King of Solo to provide wayang wong as the commercial show outside the palace. In the hands of Gan Kam, the wayang wong show was packaged in such a way that it met the need of the new urban community with a performance which was influenced by stambul (early comedy using Malayan language to tell 1001 stories) comedy group” (Nugroho & Herlina, 2015, p. 5). This fact clearly shows that with their business instinct, the Chinese immigrant managed to provide public entertainment that

can bring more people and profit. Gam Kam was also aware of the public taste in stambul stories thus he later adopted it to the wayang wong stories. Even though historically the stambul comedy was originated from Malay, the Chinese immigrant also played a part in making it famous. One Chinese immigrant by the name of Yap Goam They supported the group financially. “Based on history, the stage performance here then brought Chinese community to develop entertainment world ranging from Komedi Stamboel up to film and television cinema in Indonesia” (Nugroho & Herlina, 2015, p. 6). This is the initial point of the Chinese immigrant’s involvement in the entertainment industry in Indonesia, particularly the film industry. To be noticed that Java island is particularly of the Dutch’s interest because “Java was deemed the preconditioned of an export-oriented integrated economic development” (Nugroho & Herlina, 2015, p. 10). Java is probably chosen due to its geographical location and natural resources. That is why among thousands of island in the archipelago, Java became the center of development, even to this day. The rapid development of Java island gave birth to big cities such as Batavia (now Jakarta), Bandung, and Semarang, in which the entertainment industry was on the rise with the arrival of foreigners and the higher rise of urbanization.

During the height of the development of Java and its big cities, along came the moving picture or cinema. “Cinema was introduced to Indonesia...in the beginning of the twentieth century...The first local film that was produced in the Dutch Indies was the silent film *Loetoeng Kasaroeng* [Enchanted Monkey] [which] was based on a Sundanese folktale” (Aartsen, 2011, p. 8) (See figure 3). *Loetoeng* is a species of a black or yellow- goldish monkey with long tail which can be found in most of Southeast Asia and Southern India.



Figure 3. A promotional poster of *Loetong Kasaroeng*
(*Loetoeng Kasaroeng*, Film Cerita Pertama yang Dibuat di Indonesia, 2019)

Loetong Kasaroeng tells a story of a god called Sanghyang Guruminda who was sent to the earth in a form of a monkey. During his journey on earth, he met Princess Purbasari Ayuwangi who was cast off by her jealous sister, Purbararang. The ugly-looking monkey then married to Purbasari and transformed into a handsome man and later they became the king and queen who ruled Cupu Mandala Ayu kingdom.

After the Dutch, “a handful of ethnic Chinese—both *peranakan* and *totok*—...popularized local stories and localized an array of already circulating stories and genres. Most of the films screened at that time came from Hollywood, which targeted the Dutch people and educated Chinese, because the films’ subtitle were in Dutch language. While the indigenous people and ethnic Chinese who did not speak Malay or Dutch preferred films imported from Shanghai because they had both Malay and kuo yu subtitle. Most of these films were about Chinese legends and the local was already familiar with the legends as they had been translated to Malay in the form of literature. As an information, in 1923 a film importer company was established under the name *China Moving Picture Co*, owned by The Kim Ie. (Tjasmadi, 2008). Actually, the biggest target market for films at that period was the middle class ethnic Chinese who were financially stable. In addition, numbers of producers and directors between 1923-1932 were ethnic Chinese. Prominent among them were the Wong brothers (see figure 4), who came from Shanghai and local producers The and Tan, both of whom were also cinema owners” (Dunn & Barker, 2010). *Peranakan* is the term used to refer to ethnic Chinese who were already born in Indonesia or outside China and also refer to “the degree of their adaptation to local context, for example language, religion, or nationalism” (Ibrahim, 2013). While *totok* is defined in their relation to their origin country (China) and the cultural and political orientation level towards their origin country.



Figure 4. Nelson Wong, Joshua Wong, and Othniel Wong
(Wong Brothers, n.d.)

Indeed, what Sen argues that “Chinese immigrants had laid the foundations of the Indonesian film industry in the 1930s and Chinese finance remained the backbone of the film industry through most of its history” (Sen, 2006) rings true, although their contributions to the national cinema were not officially acknowledged as they were not considered indigenous people.

Nelson Wong directed a film called *Lily van Java* in 1928 for the South Sea Film Co., which was

produced by Liem Goan Lian and Tjan Tjoen Lian (see figure 5). The main cast of the film was ethnic Chinese such as Lie Lian Hoa, Lie Bouw Tan, Kwee Tiang An, and Yah Kwee Pang. The story is about a girl who comes from a rich family and whose father forces her to marry to a man of his choice. However, the girl, Lily, already falls in love with a man of her choice. The company was said to be the first Chinese film production collaboration in Indonesia. “The film at first was produced by an American, Len H. Ross, but then completed by Nelson Wong with the help of his brothers, Joshua and Othniel. The whole production process was taken over by the Wong brothers under the company called Halimoen Film” (Lily van Java, 2010). “Their ambition was to achieve success in commercial filmmaking. Feature films with romantic themes became their go-to product” (Darmawan, 2019).



Figure 5. A scene from *Lily van Java* (1928)
(Unknown, 2014)

After *Lily van Java*, the Wong brothers produced *Si Tjonat* (1929), a Chinese-oriented bandit film, *Rampok Preanger*, which is based on an American film, and then they produced a drama film *Jasmine of Agam* (*Melati van Agam*). In 1930 they produced *Lari ke Arab* (*Escape to Arab*), followed by the so-called first talkie film of the brothers in 1931, *Indonesia Malaise*, a comedy about a woman who pines for her imprisoned lover (Wong Brothers, n.d.). In the same year they produced *Si Pitung*, adapted from a local Batavia bandit story, with a cast of ethnic Chinese in the film. After the death of Nelson in 1945, Joshua and Othniel continued producing film such as *Pareh* (*Rice*) in 1936 which is about a forbidden love between a fisherman and a farmer's daughter. The film was not successful and almost caused them bankruptcy. In 1937/1938 they produced another film, *Terang Boelan* (*Full Moon*) which was successful. This is the last title they produced under their company as began in late 1930s, they were signed to Tan's Film company.

Besides the Wong brothers, there was also Tan's Film, established by the brothers Tan Khoen Yauw and Tan Khoen Hian in 1929. Their films targeted lower class, native ethnic groups, such as one of their films called *Njai Dasima* in 1929 (see figure 6).



Figure 6. A promotional poster of *Njai Dasima*
 (File: Njai Dasima p103.jpg, n.d.)

The story of *Njai Dasima* was adapted from a novel and it was a huge success for the Tans Brothers. After that, the Tan produced *Si Ronda* and *Jasmine van Agam* together with the Wong Brothers. In total, they produced 14 titles until around the mid-1940s. The arrival of the Japanese in 1942 significantly reduced the film production as the Japanese took control of film companies. They established a company called *Eiga Haikyusha* which monopolized the film distribution (Tjasmadi, 2008). They closed the Java Industrial Film and Tan's Film. Most movie theater were used to screen propaganda films, and although the local producers/directors can still screen films from Hollywood or China, they were obliged to screen slides and short propagandistic films from the Japanese government. In 1948 after the Indonesian independence, the Wong and Tan brothers collaborated and made a new film company and kept producing films until the early 1950s. However, the number of film production by ethnic Chinese from 1948-1949 decreased to only 3 films.

From the two brothers, Wong and Tan, one can notice that the early Chinese-Indonesians of the pre-independent Indonesia had very good eyes in looking for opportunities in new enterprise such as filmmaking that may bring huge profit. Even though the stake was high, such as high production cost, expensive equipment and the possibility of losing some money if the films were not accepted well, the brothers remained faithful in their endeavor to produce films and entertain people, which at the same time laid the foundation of the Indonesian national cinema. One other thing to notice is that most films produced during that time were adaptations from local legends, drama performance, or western films which were already famous, thus increasing the chance that the audience's familiarity to the film version. The style of filmmaking was also very influenced by western tradition, especially in the works of Wong brothers as they

once settled in the U.S. before they came to Indonesia.

The declaration of Indonesian independence in 1945 brought strong nationalistic feeling that eventually created bias in Indonesia's cinematic history. This for example is shown by the emergence of "a self-consciously nationalist generation of *pribumi* or indigenous filmmakers" (Sen, 2006). It implies that a film can be called a national film if it is directed and produced by indigenous people. This is one of the discriminations that Chinese-Indonesians faced from the perspective of the state-centered approach. It also explains why Indonesian national cinema day is marked by the production of Usmar Ismail's *Darah dan Doa* (*Blood and Payer*) in 1950 because Ismail is the first indigenous to direct a film, and not by many other films produced since the early 1900s. Another ripple effect of this nationalistic movement is a premise that national cinema must bring nationalistic spirit and not merely produced films for the sake of profit and entertainment, such as the films produced by ethnic Chinese, thus, their films are not considered national film. However, the ethnic Chinese did not necessarily disappear from the film production, because they still played an important role, thus, as Nugroho and Herlina argue, the condition creates a "paradox of entertainment" (Nugroho & Herlina, 2015). They argue that,

"In the one hand, there was an effort to create an original film of Indonesia in terms of actor, capital, plot, and even theme. The efforts went along with suspicious look of unoriginality, such as Chinese ethnic who was always accused for being only profit-oriented producer. On the other hand, the naissance of Indonesian film actually was full of multicultural process with various roles. For instance, Chinese films that gives main role to another aspect but economic as it always had process of imagining and describing a visual concept of Indonesia...It is worthy to note that it was a Chinese film businessperson who gave support to Usmar Ismail when he got post-production constraint on *Darah dan Doa* film" (Nugroho & Herlina, 2015)

The condition as stated in the quotation above signifies the important role of ethnic Chinese in the development of Indonesian cinema. Although they can no longer be on the spotlight, the strong financial capital that they had helped them to continually contribute to the national cinema. The Chinese-Indonesians' producers/directors were also the first to bring multicultural aspect to early Indonesian cinema. It should be noticed that the Chinese-Indonesians, for example The Teng Chun (see figure 7), still produced films, albeit low-cost films with vulgar and martial arts or horror theme. He was known to be a determined person and with limited resources, he managed to produce his films. Teng Chun was a son of a rich businessman who was interested in filmmaking in his youth. He established Cino Motion Picture in 1930 and he directed about six films, one of which is *Boenga Roos dari Tjikembang* (*Rose from Tjikembang*) (1931). This film was adapted from a 1927 novel under the same title and was well-received. It tells about a love story experienced by two generations of Chinese-Indonesians in Dutch Indies. He also directed a film about a famous Chinese classic story, *Sam Pek Eng Tay*. From the discussion of the ethnic Chinese directors/producers, it can be concluded that as people who were good at calculating profit, the ethnic Chinese directors came to a conclusion that producing films based on classic Chinese legends and stories is more profitable because the films attracted both the Chinese *totok* and *peranakan*, and the indigenous audience (Tjasmadi, 2008). From 1933-1936 there were at least 10 films about Chinese legends produced, most of which were directed by The Teng Chun.



Figure 7. The Teng Chun
(The Teng Chun, n.d.)

Besides being directors or producers, one prominent figure of Chinese-Indonesians at that time was Fifi Young. She was a mixed Chinese-French actress who was so famous that she played in at least 86 films in her 34 years of career (see figure 8). Besides her, there were other famous ethnic Chinese actors such as Ferry Kock and Tan Tjeng Bok, who greatly contributed to the Indonesian cinema in the aspect of acting.



Figure 8. Fifi Young
(Fifi Young, n.d.)

However, not too many ethnic Chinese after independence pursued a career as actors or actresses. Most of them preferred to be behind the scene as evident that, "In 1936, there were at least 95 cinemas owned by Chinese ethnic in some cities in Java and outside Java" (Nugroho & Herlina, 2015). Ethnic Chinese was also "...responsible for creating description of the Indonesian culture in general" (Heider, 1994) through their films which for the first time "...presented the diversity of people of the Dutch East Indies who

had their own taste and stories” (Nugroho & Herlina, 2015). The quotation highlights another important contribution of Chinese-Indonesians’ producers/directors, i.e. formulating early Indonesian culture in general. From the historical record, from about 92 films produced between 1926-1942 (Tjasmadi, 2008), 63 of them were directed or produced by ethnic Chinese, which strongly signified the importance of ethnic Chinese in the early development of national cinema.

Indonesia during the 1950s faced a tumultuous time due to the effect of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The leftist Soekarno was seen as a threat by the western bloc. CIA worked together with some top-level military figures in Indonesia managed to perform a military coup while at the same time blaming and demonizing the Indonesian Communist Party as the culprit. As a result, about half million people suspected as communists were slaughtered between 1965-1966 and through this incident the New Order regimes under Soeharto was born. Consequently,

“Following 1965 period, Indonesia became the strong partner of the U.S. and its allies. Meanwhile, all influences and historical track of the Soviet Union (Russia) and its allies including China were wiped out...Worse still, all historical path of the political, social, arts influences from Russia and East block were eliminated from historical textbooks and drove the creation of a ‘new’ history” (Nugroho & Herlina, 2015).

It is during Soeharto regime that every cultural, political or educational traces of the ethnic Chinese were subdued. “Distribution of books with Chinese alphabet and Mandarin song records was also prohibited in Indonesia” (Nugroho & Herlina, 2015). Besides that, Chinese-language schools were closed, Chinese celebrations or rituals were not allowed to be shown in public, and Chinese-Indonesians who still had Chinese names had to change their names into something sounds more local. This is another example of discrimination based on state-centered approach, in which the state itself is active in enforcing the discrimination. Paradoxically, the so-called “Chinese Problem” or state-sanctioned discrimination, did not prevent the government to have a close relationship with some Chinese-Indonesian tycoons. They created a mutual relationship in which both parties gained advantages of each other: the regime received large amount of money and the tycoons received access, protection and easiness in doing their business. Famous words to describe the regime at that time is the regime of “corruption, collusion, and nepotism.”

In cinema, not many ethnic Chinese appeared on screen as the consequences of the government policy. When some Chinese characters appeared on screen as a showcase of Indonesian diversity, they were usually played by a non-Chinese who looked or made to look like an ethnic Chinese, and their portrayal on screen was highly stereotyped. For example they always had slanted eyes, fair complexion, and were unable to pronounce the letter ‘r’. In addition, they were usually depicted as business people or people who owned stores with good economic status. Almost none were portrayed as having different occupations or career. In a way, this portrayal rings true as the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia from one generation to another are mostly traders. In addition, the restriction of ethnic Chinese in political field further strengthened the position of Chinese-Indonesians as the locomotive of Indonesian economics. There is even a common assertion that, “the Chinese [Indonesians] constitute only 3.5 percent of the population but control 70% of Indonesian economy” (Chua, 2006). This assertion is problematic as it generalizes the whole population of Chinese-Indonesians as rich people, while the reality is far from truth.

Soeharto regime applied a very strict censorship on all media, including film, with the military backup. Paradoxically, the production of film reached its peak during this regime despite the harsh government control. Some Chinese-Indonesian filmmakers worth mentioning during this era are Teguh Karya (Lim Tjoan Hok) (see figure 9) and Wim Umboh (Liem Yan Yung) (see figure 10) who were active directing films in the 1970s to the 1980s. Lim Tjoan Hok was the second generation of Chinese-Indonesian, his father was an immigrant from China.

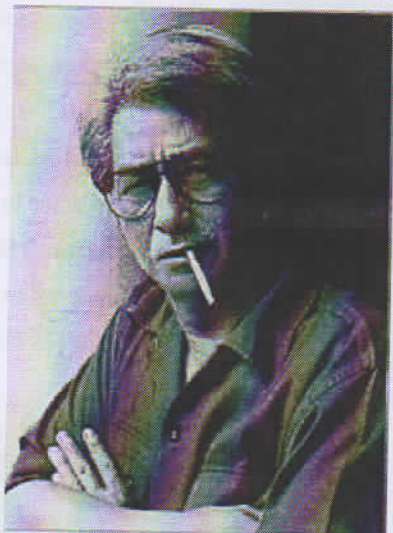


Figure 9. Teguh Karya
(Teguh Karya, n.d.)

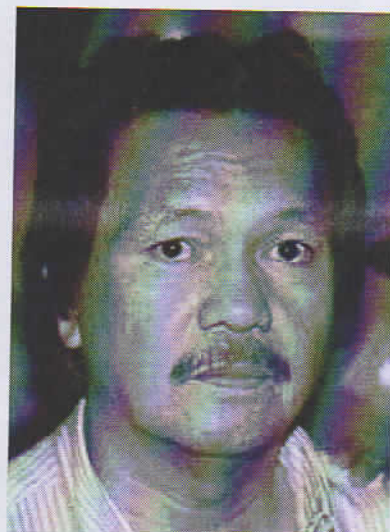


Figure 10. Wim Umboh
(Wim Umboh, n.d.)

Lim Tjoan Hok (Teguh Karya) is considered to be the maestro of Indonesia cinema with his style of realism, and his works have received domestic and international awards. "All of his films featured the prominence of highly artistic details such as property, color composition, dramatic tone, profound acting of the actor/actress" (Nugroho & Herlina, 2015). One of his *magnum opus* is the film titled *Badai Pasti Berlalu / Storm will Subside* (1977) which is adapted from a novel by Marga T. It tells about the struggle of a woman to find the meaning of true love. He directed about 20 films and also acted in some of his films, most of which centralized on the theme of identity search, life struggle, and family (Kusuma, 2009). The themes reflect his own life as a non-indigenous and an ethnical conflict that he experienced when he was young. The government policy that banned any portrayal of Chinese culture also prevented Teguh Karya from depicting Chinese characters in his films.

"Although his films do not depict ethnic Chinese characters, the treatment and characterizations of Teguh Karya's films reflect the anxiety and identity search that he experienced as a son of a Chinese immigrant man who was married to an indigenous woman. This identity confusion is transformed into family and psychological conflicts which are marked by alienation and search" (Kusuma, 2019).

Wim Umboh is another famous director who started his career from the bottom. He was an orphan since he was a kid and then he was adopted by an ethnic Chinese doctor by the name of Liem who gave him the name Liem Yan Yung and taught him Mandarin. He also once worked as a cleaning boy in the Golden

Arrow Studio where he first encountered the world of filmmaking. There, he learnt about all aspects of filmmaking from the studio owner, Chok Chin Hsien. His ability to speak Mandarin also gave him a job of translating Chinese films to Indonesian. He was a prolific director who directed about 60 films from the mid 1950s to early 1990s. He also won the best director award in Indonesian Film Festival for his film *Perkawinan / Marriage* (1973). Just like Teguh Karya, he also acted in one of his films, *Bercinta dalam Mimpi / Making Love in Dream* (1989). He was also known as the first Indonesian director who made a Cinemascope film and in color, *Sembilan / Nine* (1967), and the first 70mm film with stereo sound in *Mama* (1972) (Wim Umboh, 2010). Although both Teguh Karya and Wim Umboh appeared on screen as actors, they do not act as an ethnic Chinese character in the films.

There are only a handful of ethnic Chinese in the 1970s-1990s who pursue a career as actor/actresses, such as Henky Solaiman (Ong Han Kie) who was born in 1941 and is still active as an actor to this day (see figure 11). He is also a producer and a director, yet people mostly known him as an actor. Since the early 1970s, he has played in hundreds of films. He is initially involved in theater production as an actor and his first role in a film is in Teguh Karya's film *Wajah Seorang Laki-laki / Face of a Man* in (1971). His son, Verdi Solaiman, follows his footstep to be an actor (see figure 12).



Figure 11. Henky Solaiman
(Henky Solaiman, 2019)



Figure 12. Verdi Solaiman
(Verdi Solaiman, 2010)

Another noticeable Chinese-Indonesian actor at that time is Ferry Salim (see figure 13), who was first known as a model. He is still active and has at least been playing in 34 films. One of the films in which he played a role as the main character, *Ca Bau Kan* (2002), was the first Indonesian film that specifically portrayed the life of Chinese-Indonesians during pre-independent era. It was produced four years after Soeharto was toppled from his power through waves of students' demonstration.

The peak of political shift in Indonesia occurred in 1998 when the people, led by students, had enough of Soeharto's regime which brought the nation into its downfall especially during the 1997 economic crisis. It was in 1998 that a tragedy happened particularly to the ethnic Chinese when some unknown mass were targeting ethnic Chinese properties, shops, and even physically and sexually abused ethnic Chinese women. This kind of tragedy did not only happen once, but throughout the history of Indonesia the ethnic Chinese

often becomes the scapegoat whenever there is a political turmoil in the country. The prevailing anti-Chinese sentiment coupled with the fear of the ethnic Chinese will take over Indonesian economy play significant parts in why those incidents keep recurring. After the 1998 incident, Indonesia entered the so-called Reformation period. It was at that time that the new government lifted up the ban of Chinese culture and tradition from being displayed in public.



Figure 13. Ferry Salim
(Hadiansyah, 2017)

The film *Ca Bau Kan* is one of the cultural products that is produced as an effect of that policy. People can now learn more about the ethnic Chinese culture and tradition through film, ritual, school, or language center. The film is adapted from a novel by Remy Silado, *Ca Bau Kan*, that tells a story of an ethnic Chinese man who helps indigenous people during pre-independent Indonesia.

“Following the Reformation in 1998, the Indonesian film culture is marked by volatile reconfigurations in the relation of ethnicity. Chinese-Indonesians’ culture re-emerged and officially acknowledge 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’” (Sutandio, n.d.).

Although the portrayal of ethnic Chinese in *Ca Bau Kan* is still influenced by the traditional stereotypes, the film’s attempt to bring back Chinese-Indonesians and their culture on screen is appreciated. From that moment on, many ethnic Chinese celebrities appeared although the numbers are not yet into hundreds. Pop singers, models, actors, artists, novelists of Chinese descendants have more opportunities to showcase their talents without the fear of overt discrimination. Some of them even go international such as the pop singer Agnes Monica (see figure 14) who collaborated with some famous names in the U.S. music industry, the judo athlete turned into an actor, Joe Taslim (see figure 15) who played in some Hollywood films such as *Fast and Furious 6*, and an 18-year-old Indonesian rap star, Rich Brian, whose hip-hop songs reached number one position in iTunes in 2018 (see figure 16).



Figure 14. Agnes Monica
(Deize, n.d.)



Figure 15. Joe Taslim
(Tim Wowkeren, 2013)



Figure 16. Rich Brian
(Mixmag Asia Staff, 2018)

From the millennial generation, the name Ernest Prakasa is worth mentioning (see figure 17). He began his career as a stand-up comedian who is very aware of his Chinese background and actually formulates his comedy materials from his experience of being a Chinese-Indonesian living in Indonesia. He then turned his material into films that are surprisingly well-received by the public, especially by the millennial generation. There was initially a concern that such a blunt and straight discussion of ethnic Chinese discrimination might cause problems to the ethnic Chinese as it is a sensitive issue to discuss, but it turned out that the film was not only well received, it also reached the top six of Indonesian box office in 2015.

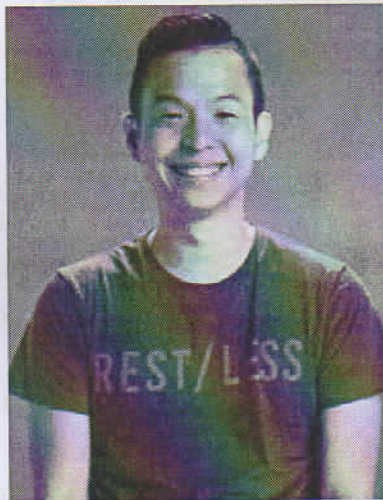


Figure 17. Ernest Prakasa
(Putriyantini, 2017)



Figure 18. Dion Wiyoko
(Wahyu, 2019)

In his films, he celebrated his Chinese-ness and at the same time ridiculing himself as Chinese-Indonesians by exaggerating Chinese-Indonesians stereotypes. In a deeper layer, he attempts to make the audience get used to the presence of ethnic Chinese and in a long run, to diminish discrimination and differences between the ethnic Chinese and the indigenous. Two of his famous comedy films are *Ngenest* (2015) and *Cek Toko Sebelah* (2016) in which he also brought in other ethnic Chinese actors/actresses such as Dion Wiyoko (see figure 18), Gisella Anastasia (see figure 19), Morgan Oey (see

figure 20), Ferry Salim and Olga Lydia (see figure 21).



Figure 19. Gisella Anastasia
(Tim Wowkeren, 2018)



Figure 20. Morgan Oey
(Wijaya, 2018)



Figure 21. Olga Lydia
(Ardi, 2019)

The premise of the film *Ngenest* is the effort of an ethnic Chinese boy to cut the bullying circle he experiences on a daily basis as a Chinese descendant. He attempts to do it by getting married to an indigenous woman. He hopes that by marrying someone physically different from him, his children will not bear the sign of physical Chinese-ness. Because it is a comedy, the film ends with him having a baby that physically look Chinese. Eventually he can accept himself as a Chinese descendant and that some things just cannot be changed.

In *Cek Toko Sebelah*, Ernest played as Erwin, a successful young Chinese-Indonesian who has a beautiful and successful Chinese-Indonesian girlfriend. Conflicts happen when his ill father who owns a small store wants Erwin to inherit and continue the business. At the same time, Erwin's brother, Yohan, actually wants to be the one who inherits the business, but his father does not really trust him as he has always been a rebellious son, especially after he married to an indigenous woman. The father is depicted as a character who is traumatized by the 1998 incident, thus he does not trust the indigenous people and his son's marriage to an indigenous woman disappoints him. The portrayal of Chinese-Indonesians family and the dynamic relationship among them is very touching and realistically portraying what many Chinese-Indonesians family face in their real life.

Today, Indonesian national cinema has gone transnational with the growing numbers of cooperation and collaboration with various countries, and Chinese-Indonesians' producers and artists maintain their active involvement in the film productions. The growing transnationalism at the same time blurs the concept of national cinema, however, this happens all around the world because collaboration becomes one of the keys to the success for film production. Film production in one country will face difficulty to compete in the open market world as today, thus collaboration and cooperation is the way out to survive the competition, including in the context of Indonesian national cinema. It is our great hope that the collaboration will also further diminish discrimination, teach the audience about tolerance towards differences, and strengthen unity among filmmakers to produce good-quality and mind-opening films.

Conclusion

The journey of Chinese-Indonesians in the world of Indonesian cinema is not a smooth one. There are many challenges and obstacles they have to face as minority and the least favored ethnic in Indonesia. They have to work harder than anyone else to be able to establish their position in the career they pursue. From the first production of films by ethnic Chinese directors, they have to compete against the Dutch colonialists. During the Japanese occupation, all of their studios were closed down and they lost a lot. When Indonesia declared its independence, the challenges came from their fellow Indonesians who thought that the ethnic Chinese were capitalists and not nationalistic enough, thus all the film productions they made before were never considered as national films. The Cold War brought another problem to the ethnic Chinese when as the outcome of the conflict, everything related to China or Chinese-ness was banned, never to be shown in public, and this lasted for 32 years. At the end of the Soeharto's regime in 1998, the ethnic Chinese became the victims of the political turmoils when they houses and stores were looted and burnt, and their women were sexually abused.

The reformation era brought a glimpse of hope, started by the new government policy to allow ethnic Chinese to express their Chinese-ness freely. Started in 1999, the ethnic Chinese can freely celebrate their rituals and express their culture more openly. It is at this moment that many ethnic Chinese celebrities surface. They are no longer afraid to show their Chinese-ness in public and on screen. *Ca Bau Kan* became the first movie that specifically talks about the ethnic Chinese, after a long 32 years of hibernation. New generation of ethnic Chinese directors, actors, artists appeared and enriched the Indonesian culture with their Chinese-ness.

However, all this freedom of expression does not mean that discrimination completely disappears, in fact it still prevails and is always ready to re-emerge in a full-blown capacity, just like what happened to the case of the ex-governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok, a Chinese-Indonesian (see figure 22), who was slandered due to what he said during a governor campaign in 2017. He had to spend two years due to the pressure of public persecution. As a tribute to his legacy of making Jakarta a better city through good and clean governance when he was in the office, a film was made under the title of *A Man Called Ahok* (2018) in which an ethnic Chinese ex-MTV VJ turned into actor, Daniel Mananta (see figure 23), played the role of Ahok.



Figure 22. Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok)
(Jegho,2016)



Figure 23. Daniel Mananta
(Fadillah, 2017)

Regardless all the obstacles and challenges, Chinese-Indonesians are known to be resilient and persevere. Oey Kim Hong, a Chinese-Indonesian businessman who lived in the 1960s, believed that the root of ethnic Chinese' prosperity is because they highly upheld Sam Kao philosophy (Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism). Particularly in the aspect of culture and trading there is one Confucius philosophical term: "ren" (benevolence) which became the guidance in life for them (Tjasmadi, 2008).

At this moment, Indonesia is moving forward into a better future with the re-election of Indonesian president, Joko Widodo. The relationship with China is also stronger, marked by the regular meetings between the two governments. In the context of ethnic discrimination, the government slowly but sure attempt to eradicate intolerance through education, cross-cultural understanding, and political policy. It is a great hope for all Chinese-Indonesians that one day they will not be seen as "The Other" but as fellow Indonesians who possess the same rights and obligations as citizens.

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