

‘Chinese’ Indonesians in national cinema¹

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ABSTRACT (about 300 words)

Through much of post-colonial history and particularly during the so-called ‘New Order’ (under General Suharto), Indonesian citizens of ethnic Chinese descent have been caught in a strangely ambiguous position: they have enjoyed enormous economic power while at the same time being threatened with politico-cultural effacement. This paper is an attempt to understand that ambiguity in relation to the Indonesian cinema – both around questions of industry history and around issues of representation of national and ethnic identity on screen. The paper traces the presence, the erasure and the absent-presence of Indonesia’s ethnic Chinese minority from the establishment of a film industry in Indonesia in the 1930s to the post-New Order political shifts, opening up possibilities for a new public discourse of Chineseness. I argue however that the openness of current Indonesian culture and politics while providing the necessary condition for re-imagining the Chinese Indonesians, does not ensure a radical shift in a politics of representation, deeply embedded in the textual practices of the film industry and more widely in cultural and political history of modern Indonesia.

KEYWORDS: Indonesia, Chinese Indonesians, cinema, politics, film industry, ethnicity, citizenship.

To my knowledge there has been no substantial research on the place of the ethnic Chinese minority in Indonesian cinema. At one level this is somewhat surprising, as 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. This almost total absence of any reference to Chinese in much of the cultural and artistic work, including cinema, throughout the period of the New Order (1966-98)² is easily explained by the Suharto regime’s deliberate move to obliterate all public display of Chineseness. Just

about every piece of academic writing on the Chinese in New Order Indonesia starts with an acknowledgement of the strangely ambiguous position of the Ethnic Chinese: their financial pre-eminence on the one hand, and their politico-cultural effacement on the other.³

There are other ways to think about the ambiguity of the Chinese in Indonesia specifically in relation to Indonesian cinema. On the one hand the role of the ethnic Chinese in the foundation of Indonesian cinema, not just as producers, financiers and distributors but also as the creative fount of cinema as directors and cameramen⁴, is undeniable. On the other hand, Chinese Indonesians are rarely present as subject matters of film texts even before their absence is effectively mandated by government policy under the New Order. On the one hand, Teguh Karya (ethnic Chinese) has auteur/guru/star status in the annals of New Order cinema, and on the other, there is not a single Chinese character across the body of his work. There are parallels here with what Ariel Heryanto calls the ‘thematic silence’ of Indonesian literary canon: ‘The national literature of Indonesia has been curiously silent about an important aspect in the life of its immediate audience: the ethnic tension between the Chinese minority and the so-called “indigenous” population’ (Heryanto 1997:26). But the silence seems even more thundering in the case of cinema because of the authorial prominence of the Chinese throughout the history of the cultural form, and in the New Order especially, perhaps because of the towering presence of Teguh Karya – Steve Lim – as *the* pre-eminent *nationalist* auteur-director of his generation, to whom I will return later in the essay.

The presumed link between a political order and a discursive order which underlies this and many other accounts of cultural production begs a question: has the political transition in Indonesia from authoritarian rule to democracy seen some radical transformation in the construction of the Chinese-Indonesian subject? Does democratisation in Indonesia necessitate/require a new narrative about the Chinese minority?

One cannot of course, as many scholars have warned, take the 'Chinese' (or indeed any other ethnic) minority as a concrete ethnic 'fact' in Indonesia. In his seminal work on the subject, Charles Coppel defines the 'Indonesian Chinese' 'as persons of Chinese ancestry who either function as members of, and identify with, Chinese society or are regarded as Chinese by indigenous Indonesians (at least in some circumstances) and given special treatment as a consequence' (Coppel 1983: 5). Benedict Anderson, the pre-eminent theorist of nation writes: 'It is easy to forget that minorities came into existence in tandem with majorities – and in Southeast Asia, very recently.... They were born of the political and cultural revolution brought about by the maturing of the colonial state and by the rise against it of popular nationalism' (Anderson 2000: 318) Of the Dutch East Indies in particular, Anderson writes:

We know from comparing United East India Company (VOC) and indigenous records of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that powerful persons whom local courts regarded simply as aristocratic officials were denounced by the VOC as "really Chinese". The Company quickly developed a separate jurisprudence for these "Chinese" (who

were clearly unaware of being such...). Growing company power meant increasing segregation of the Chinese in terms of legal status, required costuming and barbering, residence, possibility of travel and so on. By the 19th century these policies had produced in Java a non-Chinese-speaking ethnic Chinese minority that was increasingly detached from any native coalition and hitched to Batavia's wagon

(Anderson 2000: 321).

By the early 20th century when films first arrived in Java and Sumatra, these Indies Chinese had clearly become an identifiable and material group, who, in the context of this industry, were merged into the new Chinese-speaking arrivals from China and distinguished from the indigenes both in the diegesis on screen and in the material and discursive relationships behind the camera. In other words, the inception of Indonesian cinema was heavily marked by the material presence of those identified as 'Chinese'. The question for this paper is if and how that marking survived the erasures of the New Order, and of post-colonial nationalism more generally.

Early Indonesian cinema

Ethnic Chinese were involved in the movie business ever since the arrival of the first films in the Dutch East Indies. Chinese owned the overwhelming majority, if not all, of the earliest movie theatres established in the first three decades of the 20th century in the cities of Indonesia. By the late 1920s they were both importing films from China and producing films in Indonesia. In 1926 and 1927

Dutch directors had produced two feature length films set in the Indies. A film industry began emerging from around 1928, coincidentally the year the first of the 'Wong brothers', Nelson, migrated to Bandung from Shanghai. Three other brothers followed soon after and together they dominated the film industry through the 1930s along with various 'peranakan'⁵ (local born, indigenised, of mixed ancestry) Chinese businessmen, who funded their productions. On the best available evidence, six feature films were produced in Indonesia in 1928 and 1929, all of them financed and directed by Chinese men. All of the technicians and the majority of actors also appear to have been Chinese. Through the 1930s indigenous names begin to appear in the film credits, first as actors and then as writers. But of the 40 or so films made in the 1930s (for which there are some records), all but seven (directed by Europeans) were produced and directed by Chinese.⁶

The first indigenous Indonesian directors, editors and art-directors appeared in the film industry in 1940 and by the time of the Japanese arrival in 1942 there were at least five indigenous directors, some of them with several films to their credit. Japanese occupation is frequently seen as promoting the indigenous population's role in many walks of life including cinema. The Japanese banned all Chinese production companies and began to train a new generation of Indonesian film-makers with newer Japanese technology and new ideas about the political power of cinema. However, the first indigenous Indonesian directors – Raden Arieffin, Anjar Asmara, Suska, Inoe Perbatasari and Mohammad Said – all trained within an industry which was funded and culturally led by Chinese migrants. Only one of the five was directly engaged in

directing films during the Japanese interregnum but all of them went on to play a significant role in the emerging 'national' cinema of post-independence Indonesia in the 1950s.

A 'national' cinema?

Histories of 'national' cinema written by Indonesians often start at the point of the emergence of a self-consciously nationalist generation of *pribumi* or indigenous film-makers. This national cinema is defined as post-colonial not merely by its autonomy from colonial processes and regulations, but also by downplaying the Chinese connection. In practice however Chinese production houses were quickly re-established after 1950 and while there were *pribumi*-owned production companies (and these are much valorised in the writings about Indonesian cinema) there would have been very few films completed and released through the 1950s without some funding from Chinese-owned businesses.

But finances apart, the shape of the post-colonial Indonesian film industry did seem to have been transformed across the period of Japanese occupation and nationalist struggle. The two younger of the Wong Brothers returned to directing and producing films in 1948 and as producers remained active into the mid-1960s. Fred Young, a Semarang-born (Java) *Peranakan* Chinese was one of the most prolific film directors of the early 1950s. Nonetheless, through the early 1950s much larger numbers of indigenous Indonesians entered the industry in particular as actors and directors, but also in all of the technical and creative behind-the-camera roles. Only about a quarter or less of the 260 films produced

from 1950 to 1955 had any Chinese names listed in the film credits other than as producer/financier.

In the next decade, as the levels of annual film production declined and cinema, both industrially and textually, became increasingly enmeshed in the national political debates, Chinese Indonesians seemed to all but disappear from any significant creative roles both on and off camera.⁷ Of the 131 films made between 1960 and 1965, only two films have Chinese names appear in the credits as 'director': Sho Bun Seng directed *Adolescent Style (Gaja Remadja)* in 1960; and Fred Young, *Behind the Clouds (Dibalik Awan)* in 1963. But by the late 1950s, and particularly after the Name-change Law of 1961⁸, Chinese ethnic identity could no longer be taken for granted on the basis of names in the film credits, as some of the Chinese Indonesians – including those in the film industry – adopted 'indigenous' names, or pen-names to conform to the nationalist discourse of 'assimilation'. The two most prolific Chinese Indonesian director-writers, Tan Sing Hwat and Fred Young (pen name, Utomo), both used indigenous sounding names from time to time. Tan Sing Hwat using the Javanese-sounding name Tandu Honggonegoro (which he had used occasionally since the early 1950s) directed two films in 1961 (*In the Valley of Gunung Kawi [Dilereng Gunung Kawi]*, and *A Song and a Book [Lagu dan Buku]*). Some who entered the film industry in the 1950s used exclusively Indonesian names, so that increasingly the Chinese could not be identified from film credits in the same way that other ethnic groups might be. Chinese names were thus being erased from Indonesian cinema even before the arrival of the overt cultural constraints of the New Order. From their complete dominance of the industry in the 1930s,

Chinese Indonesian writers, directors and technicians had become a small minority by the 1960s, and even that relatively small presence was disguised under adopted names and identities. Seen from the point of view of this disguise, Lim Tjoan Hok/Teguh Karya seems to inherit the mantle of Tan Sing Hwat/Tandu Honggonegoro, though for various reasons (some of which will become obvious) it is not a heritage that Teguh would or could ever claim. But before turning to the New Order film makers and in particular Teguh Karya, something needs to be said about the thematic shifts in film texts.

Themes⁹

The Wong brothers' first film *Lily of Java* (*Melatie van Java*, 1927) about forced marriage within a Chinese Indonesian family, was reportedly not a commercial success. Their second film, *Si Conat* (name of the villain), by contrast set the standards for what would constitute 'popular film' for the next decade or so. The film's financial backer Jo Eng Sek selected the story, the tale of an ethnic Indonesian villain and an ethnic Chinese hero. The *Si Conat* story was part of the repertoire of *lenong*, a form of theatre particularly associated with the Betawi people, the pre-colonial indigenous population of the area around Batavia (Dutch Indies capital), later Jakarta. In the film, the delinquent Conat absconds after committing murder. After various adventures, including stealing from a Dutch family while working for them, Conat becomes attracted to a young Chinese woman Li Gouw Nio, who predictably refuses his advances. This brings him in contact with Thio Sing Sang, an expert in Chinese martial arts, who foils Conat's attempt to abduct Nio. The successful formula of this film, with stories drawn

from the repertoires of folk theatre and with lots of good fighting scenes copied from Hollywood westerns was repeated several times by the late 1930s, but few so clearly pitted a Chinese hero against an indigenous villain. The Wongs' next film following this formula was *Si Pitoeng* (1931), the Robin Hood of Betawi folk lore, a bandit with magical powers that allow him constantly to evade capture by the Dutch police.

Most commonly films seemed to be located within clearly marked indigenous or 'Chinese-Indonesian' cultural boundaries. Possibly as many as half of the films of the 1930s were set almost exclusively within the Chinese Indonesian community.¹⁰ Only a very few films dealt with indigenous-Chinese relations as the main thematic issue. In the 1930s I can find only one film which was primarily about inter-ethnic relations. *The Rose of Cikambeng* (*Boonga Roos Dari Tjikambeng*) was directed in 1931 by one of the most prolific directors of the period, The Teng Tjun. The film was based on a serialised novel by Kwee Tok Hoay and told the story of a young plantation employee Oh Ay Tjeng, who is forced by his father to give up his beloved Marsiti to marry Gwat Nio, the daughter of the plantation owner. After an extraordinarily intricate set of tragic events and relationships that unfold over two generations, we discover the illegitimate daughter of Marsiti and Ay Tjeng with the son of another Chinese plantation owner. Stories of arranged marriages were a common romantic formula in the 1930s to 1950s and fitted into the wider debate over tradition (represented by arranged marriage) and modernity (by romantic love). The theme of inter-ethnic relations should have been easy to fit into such a format, and on occasions were – but rarely Chinese-Indigenous relations.

The Rose of Cikambeng is most probably the first film about ‘assimilation’ (or *pembauran*). But the kind of assimilation this film promotes is fundamentally different (as we will see a little later in this paper) from the premises that underlie the official policy of assimilation in post-colonial Indonesia, and in particular in the years of the New Order. Suffice it to say at this point that stories of ‘*pembauran*’ involving Chinese-Indigenous relationship or indeed involving other migrant groups, such as the Indians or the Arabs (who are by all accounts relatively more integrated into Indonesian society, and thus the issue of exclusion might be less significant) are very few and far between in the annals of Indonesian cinema. Indeed through the 1950s, ethnic identities emerge in films primarily via locales; that is, we see explicitly Bataks or Balinese or Betawi characters mainly when a story is located in Sumatra or Bali or the rural hinterland of Jakarta. Those citizens who cannot be included into the Indonesian nation-state in ethno-local terms have quite literally no place in the discourse of national cinema from the 1950s onwards. I have touched on the general issue of ‘ethnicity’ in Indonesian cinema elsewhere (Sen 2003), but a full account of how ethnicity is inscribed and proscribed in Indonesian cinema waits to be written. Here I want to make just one specific point about the place of the Chinese: in 1931, *The Rose of Cikambeng* legitimised the ‘illegitimate’ daughter of a Chinese father and native mother; by closing in a happy ending the text gave the child of a cross-ethnic union a place in the Indies society. But the story of a Chinese father producing an Indonesian child/citizen would not be told until the start of the 21st century (which we will get to at the end of this paper).

A 'New Order' for Indonesian Chinese?

This silence of cinema, in the New Order period at least, needs to be read in the context of the regimes 'manifestly ambivalent' (Coppel 2002: 21) policies and laws regarding Indonesians of Chinese descent. In the strangely discriminatory operations of Indonesia's laws, both before and after 1965, citizenship, in effect passes from generation to generation in the case of ethnic Indonesians and indeed to descendants of indigenous father and Chinese-Indonesian mother, but not to those of Chinese descent or from Chinese father and Indonesian mother ('since paternal citizenship constituted the framework for determining children's legal status' Aguilar 2001: 519). As the Indonesian Chinese cultural theorist Ariel Heryanto puts it

While Chinese males are highly praised for intermarriage, such intermarriage does not turn a Chinese groom into an equal fellow citizen. Chinese males marrying native women still have to carry special identification cards and are subject to various other administrative discriminations. Their children are still classed as non-*pribumi* (non-indigenous), regardless of how purely native their mothers are.

(Heryanto 1998: 103)

The New Order's mode of dealing with 'the Chinese problem'¹¹ was clear from the beginning. In his very first Independence Day speech as Acting President (16 August 1967) Major General Suharto called on the 'ethnic Chinese to abandon exclusiveness, to change their names, and in rather threatening tones, [called] on

them not to delay any longer in integrating and assimilating into the Indonesian (indigenous) community' (Coppel 2002: 22) The president's elaboration of what assimilation means is instructive: 'Integration and assimilation mean participating in all activities of the Indonesian people with all their joy and sorrow. So physically and mentally there will no longer be a curtain dividing Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent and (indigenous) Indonesian citizens.' (Excerpt from Presidential speech cited in Coppel 2002: 30) In the following year the 'Basic Policy on Indonesian Citizens of Foreign Descent' (Inpres 240, 1967 see Coppel 2002: 31-47) article 5 urged 'those who still used Chinese names... to replace them with Indonesian' ones (Coppel 2002: 22). Over the next few years a string of laws and decrees resulted in an effective ban on all public use of Chinese language, script and all displays of Chinese cultural practices and rituals.

As indicated earlier in the paper, and as Coppel has pointed out, the discriminatory treatment of the Chinese can be traced back to the 'divisive colonial legacy'. But the discourse of assimilation is post-colonial and one which seems to have been transformed by the New Order in quite fundamental ways. Coppel suggests that in the years of Sukarno's Guided Democracy (1957-65) the ethnic Chinese were beginning to be 're-imagined' as 'an indigenous Indonesian ethnic group (...) alongside the hundreds of other ethnic groups in Indonesia's richly multicultural society'. By contrast, the New Order's assimilationist project 'required the ethnic Chinese to lose their Chineseness and to be absorbed without a trace into the wider Indonesian population.' (Coppel 2002: 27) But as Heryanto (1998) has argued, this project of the New Order was always self-contradictory,

because the existence within the nation of an identifiable pariah Chinese 'other' fitted perfectly into the regime's mode of political control.

Almost everyone writing on the Chinese in the New Order acknowledges their complete exclusion from the political and cultural life of the nation as an ethnic group. With the exception of Bob Hasan appointed to Suharto's last cabinet, there had never been a 'Chinese' cabinet minister in the New Order, 'though such ministers were a regular feature (of earlier governments) Nor ... any generals or senior civil servant of obvious Chinese ancestry.' (Anderson 1990: 115). On the other hand, it is equally well-documented that the New Order provided individual Chinese with opportunities for amassing unprecedented amounts of wealth in collusion particularly with the Suharto family, but also other politically powerful ethnic Indonesians. It is worth quoting as some length here Heryanto's description of the peculiar location of the Chinese in the New Order:

Chinese economic domination reinforced the long-standing antagonism of the native population. Periodic anti-Chinese riots have been reported, narrated, analysed and remembered as something natural and spontaneous, as a populist search for justice. While security officers usually act to restore order, in the final analysis the violence serves the interests of the regime. It reproduces the Chinese dependence on state protection and defers, if not undercuts the potential emergence of a domestic bourgeoisie. The violence discredits the popular native efforts to express grievances, and deflects anger away from both the state and

sensitive foreign investors. The security apparatus can always play the role of hero.

....

Given the importance of ethnic tension in reproducing the New Order's economic growth and political stability, the government's decision to promote the *ineffective* programme of ethnic assimilation makes sense

(Heryanto 1998: 102, my emphasis.)

Therefore, he concludes, in the thirty years of the New Order 'Chinese identities are never totally ... wiped out, they are carefully and continually reproduced, but always under erasure' (Heryanto 1998:104).

Erased presences in New Order cinema

Indonesian cinema all but disappeared between 1964 and 1966, in the traumatic transition to the New Order. When it revived in the late 1960s and began to thrive in the 1970s, two things were clear. First, in New Order-produced histories, something called 'national cinema' began in 1950, with the work of two '*pribumi*' film-makers, Usmar Ismail (dubbed, in the 1970s the 'father of Indonesian cinema') and Djamaludin Malik.¹² In effect this history erased both the Chinese and the left¹³ from the national and nationalist film history.

Secondly, reflecting their peculiar position of economic power and cultural voicelessness, the 'Chinese' owned the overwhelming majority of production companies, movie theatres, the import and distribution networks, but could not speak openly as 'Chinese Indonesians' in the texts of the films they funded. It is

arguable that ethnicity itself became an ‘unspeakable’ of Indonesian cinema, as government prescriptions and proscriptions censored and censured all discussions of ethnic and religious conflict in the media generally and in cinema in particular.¹⁴

Of the 200 or so films of the New Order period that I have seen and more that I have a knowledge of from reviews and scenarios, only one film deals overtly and substantially with Chinese presence in Indonesia and has an ethnic Chinese heroine. *Beautiful Giok (Putri Giok)* made in 1980 projected the official New Order version of both the ‘Chinese problem’ and its solution through a very particular kind of ‘assimilation’. A rich Chinese businessman, Han Liong Swie, goes to inhuman lengths to prevent his daughter, Han Giok Nio, marrying an ‘Indonesian’ (defined as such by the film) young man with immaculate credentials. The latter’s very modern and nationalist family, by contrast, welcome Giok with open arms. In the end the Chinese father relents and the marriage takes place, promising, one assumes, the absorption of this Chinese woman into the Indonesian nation, and deligitimizing through the villainous Chinese father the discourse of Chinese cultural identity.

In terms of both popular and critical success, four men dominated the 1970s: Ami Priyono, Sjuman Djaja, Wim Umboh and Teguh Karya. For all the excision of the left and the Chinese, each one of the four bore a connection to one or the other of those traditions. Ami Priyono was the son of man who had been a minister in Sukarno’s radical nationalist government. Sjuman Djaja had received a Soviet government scholarship in the hey days of the Sukarno government’s anti-westernism and graduated from Moscow’s famous film school

in 1965. Wim Umboh's early training was as assistant to Hu, the main director in the Golden Arrow, one of the large production companies of the 1950s. Wim was reputedly a fluent speaker of Mandarin and acknowledged as his 'guru' the Golden Arrow proprietor, Chok Chin Hsin.

Arguably, Teguh Karya was the most influential of the 1970s film-makers, in terms of both his legacy to the next generation of Indonesian film makers and, more importantly for the purposes of this paper, in defining what constituted 'nationalist' cinema in the New Order. Unlike Wim Umboh, Teguh Karya never discussed his Chinese heritage in any public forum. In media interviews and his own rare writings he presented himself unproblematically as an Indonesian, who had inherited the mantle of national cinema from Usmar Ismail and Djameluddin Malik. His closeness to D. Djajakusuma¹⁵ whom he regarded as his teacher and intellectual father figure, and in turn Djajakusuma's closeness to Usmar enhanced Teguh's self-proclaimed descent from the 'father of Indonesian Cinema'. As a nationally and internationally recognised cultural figure, he was peerless amongst the Chinese Indonesians of his generation. He can count amongst his disciples a veritable 'who's who' of Indonesian cinema and theatre in the last decade of the New Order.¹⁶

Teguh Karya was born in rural West Java in 1937. He was named Liem Tjoan Hok and later baptised Steve Lim. In his only autobiographical piece, published in 1993, Teguh talked for the first time about his parentage in some detail: 'I was the first of five siblings born of mixed parentage between a migrant from China and a young girl from Bekasi' (in the 1930s rural outskirts of Jakarta) (Karya 1993: 13). For the next page or so Teguh provides background to the

maternal side of his family and in particular the influence of his maternal uncle who was a teacher of Indonesian language. There is only one other mention of his father: 'Although our family was pretty ordinary, it was still categorised as prosperous in the village of my birth. So my father was able to buy me a pair of shoes to wear to school. But half-way I would hide them in the hole of a big tree. So, I went to school bare-feet like all my friends.' (Karya 1993: 13) Indeed in the first line of his autobiographical essay Teguh claims a quite different paternal inheritance: 'D. Djajakusuma, was not just my teacher, but also older brother and also father' (Karya 1993:12).

It is difficult to write without letting my personal contact with Pak Teguh intrude here. That contact was in a way refracted through the constant and simultaneous mention and denial of his Chineseness. When I went to interview Teguh Karya for the first time, as a post-graduate student in 1979 (I had just arrived to do my fieldwork), he had just finished *November 1828* (November 1828, discussed in the next section). With characteristic warmth he drew me into the 'Teater Populer' family. Within hours, a young woman on the periphery of the group had whispered to me 'you know he is Chinese. But don't ask him anything about it' (or words to that effect). Over the next few weeks many people inside and outside his immediate circle repeated pretty much those words. I realised quickly, everyone knew Teguh was 'Chinese', that you could only whisper this, but more than that, everyone compulsively seemed to whisper this. The whisper had a peculiar public manifestation in that the print media would often put a bracketed (Steve Lim) next to his name, Teguh Karya! Reading his ten-page 'autobiography', it seemed to me that when he finally mentions his

Chinese heritage in his own writing, in 1993, he reproduces the same hushed mention of his Chineseness which I had heard so many times before – a heritage acknowledged only to be immediately downgraded as unimportant.

Film journalist Marselli Sumarno is probably the only commentator to date to note the implications of Teguh's ethnicity for his film work: 'Teguh's protagonists are those who are buffeted in the search for identity....This is one matter which can be clearly be sourced to the personal history of Teguh, who happens to be of Chinese descent, which is a minority community in Indonesia.' (Sumarno 1993:84-85).

Seeing ethnicity in Teguh Karya's work

By the time Teguh Karya made his first film, *Ballad of a Man (Wajah Seorang Laki-laki, literally Face of a Man)* in 1971, he had already achieved national acknowledgement as the founder and director of the Teater Populer group. *Wajah*, an unusually experimental, low budget and stagey production in the context of its time, did not win popular support. It did, however, establish Teguh as a credible film-maker, alongside other 'intellectual' film-makers of previous generations. While Teater Populer continued to stage a few plays through most of the 1970s, Teguh's national and international reputation as a film director would far exceed the relatively limited appeal of the work of his theatre group.

Cinema, much more than theatre, was also Teguh's vehicle for telling *his* stories. The overwhelming majority of the plays performed by Teater Populer since its founding in 1968 (to the mid-1990s, when Teguh's career effectively ended) were translations of western classics. Only one Teater Populer play was

written by Teguh Karya. By contrast, Teguh wrote the scenario for every one of his thirteen films (some co-written, all but one with one or other of his 'disciples'). Most of the stories were also written or co-written by him and with one exception (*Kawin Lari*, very loosely based on Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*) none of his film stories were foreign derived. It is impossible to doubt Teguh's authorial control over his film work with all characteristically being advertised as 'a Teguh Karya' film.

Of his first film Teguh once said 'This is my self-portrait' (*Kompas* 23 June, 1972 quoted in Sumarno 1993). The film is set in the outskirts of the Dutch-Indies capital Batavia in the late 19th century amongst the descendants of Portuguese, who were amongst the earliest European traders and adventurers to arrive on the island of Java (Ricklefs 2001). It is the story of Amallo, a young man in rebellion against his father, Umbu Kapitan. When the film starts, Amallo's presumably indigenous mother is dead and Umbu, who is of Portuguese descent and works for the Dutch, has remarried an *Indo* (that is part-Dutch, part native) woman. Amallo hates his father and his Indo wife whose mixed heritage is ostensibly no different from Amallo's own. The film starts with the hero being thrown out of his father's house. Adding an Oedipal turn to the story, Amallo becomes involved in sexual relationships first with the mistress of a Dutch officer and then in a set of lovingly filmed episodes with Umi, a seemingly older (emphatically more experienced) woman who owns the village eatery. Amallo's rebellion against his father quickly takes the form of hatred against the Dutch as he helps a band of young gangsters in stealing arms and horses belonging to the Dutch, stored on his father's property. Arrested and

released he returns to the same activities and is betrayed by another gang member. In the climactic scene, Amallo is shot by his own father. In the final shot, his motherly lover raises her head briefly from his dead body to address Umbu: 'your son'. Amallo's struggle is futile – he cannot belong to his father's house, nor does he in the final analysis find a place in his mother's land, except in death.

In 1978, in his longest (nearly three hours), most expensive (it cost, according to industry gossip, about twice as much as the average film made that year), and most overtly nationalistic film, *November 1828 (Nopember 1828)* Teguh dealt again with the sons of foreign fathers and native mothers, but this time on the margins of a nationalist epic about the Java Wars against the Dutch. Directed, written and scripted by Teguh, the film swept up all of the major awards at the 1979 Annual Film Festival, including those for best Director and best film. The advertising described the film as Teguh Karya's most 'patriotic' work. Teguh himself described the film as having an 'important national function' in 'a country of many islands with diverse cultural traditions' and particularly in making cinema 'a medium for expressing one's feelings inspired by the call of his motherland'. (Karya 1988: 7) The film was immediately raised by official discourse into the status of a classic and an iconic nationalist text.

November 1828 is set in the second stage of the Java Wars led by the Prince Diponegoro, regarded in official nationalist discourse as a precursor to the emergence of Indonesia's national struggle against colonial occupation.¹⁷ The story unfolds in a Central Javanese village, which the Dutch troops have occupied on suspicion of its collusion with the forces of Sentot Prawirodirjo, one

of Diponegoro's principal lieutenants. The greedy opportunistic village head Jayengnegoro turns Dutch spy accusing the respected elder Kromoludiro of colluding with the rebel Prince. The revered Islamic teacher, Kiyai Karto Sarjan sends his students to inform Sentot about the Dutch occupation of the village. As the cruel and ambitious Dutch commander Captain de Borst, the principal colonial character and villain of the story, tries through torture to extort information from Kromoludiro, Lieutenant van Aaken, second in command on the Dutch side declares his own collusion with Sentot. De Borst kills Kromoludiro and puts van Aaken under arrest.

Eventually, forces led by Sentot, using clever strategies and support from the surrounding villages defeats the colonial forces. In the closing sequence of the film, an advance Javanese force enters the area fortified by the Dutch under the guise of a dance troupe. Attack is launched suddenly and simultaneously by frenzied dancers inside the fortress and masses of villagers at its gates. Before the Dutch commanders can recover from their confusion, the bastions of the fort are down and villagers pour in with bamboo spears and bows, laying down their lives before the chaotic Dutch fire-power. Just as the Dutch are recovering, Sentot rides in, at the head of a well-armed army, the Dutch are beaten, de Borst dies a slow, painful, theatrical death. The village is 'liberated'; Indonesian nationalists have out-gunned and out-manoevred the colonial Dutch. This liberation connotes the birth of the nation and the union of all sections of the society in anti-colonial struggle – the political and military leadership represented by Sentot, the artists and intellectuals by the dance troupe, Islam by the Kiyai and the common villagers.

But a chink in the national armour (or perhaps this is the sting in Teguh's nationalist tale) appears in the conflict between the Dutch commander de Borst and his deputy van Aaken. Unable to bear de Borst's torture of Kromoludiro, van Aaken admits that he rather than the villager has been informing Diponegoro's generals about the movements and plans of the Dutch. In successive flashbacks we learn about the two most senior Dutch officers in the film. De Borst the fanatical Dutch and van Aaken who has become an Indonesian partisan have exactly the same background. Both men spent their childhood in opulent mansions with loving Dutch fathers and Indonesian mothers. The child de Borst carrying martial toys runs to his fathers embrace. 'What will you be when you grow up', asks the indulgent father; 'General' says child de Borst as his mother turns away. The more reflective child van Aaken, in his mother's arms asks 'Are the Javanese really evil'. His mother: 'ask your father', to which his smiling father responds, 'There are no evil people. There are greedy persons... amongst the Dutch too.' The ambitious boy becomes a repressive colonial, and is eventually killed by his mother's people. The other boy lives in a morally ambiguous position, betraying the Dutch and never becoming part of the Indonesian side either. Van Aaken is killed in the cross-fire in the closing battle sequence of the film.

In the nation that Teguh Karya's film constructs, there seems to be no place for the sons of foreign fathers and indigenous mothers, no matter what moral choices the children make, no matter how warmly they embrace their mother and her people. In that sense, Teguh's own biography, as the son of a Chinese father is never too far from the surface of the narrative. Every one of his

overtly nationalist films is also an indictment of a system which refused full citizenship to those of Chinese descent and simultaneously denied them a place to explore their Chineseness.

Finding Chinese fathers' children

In the post-Suharto era, some of the most overt legal restrictions on Chinese language and culture were removed. A Chinese language press re-emerged in Indonesia and there seemed to be a flurry of cultural activity foregrounding Chinese Indonesian identity. As part of this flurry, Indonesia's largest publisher Gramedia announced a new initiative, the *Peranakan Chinese Literary Series*. The first novel of the series, Remy Sylado's *Courtesan (Ca-bau-kan)*, was published in 1999. The publishers introduced it as being 'about the life of the community of Chinese descent in Indonesia.' The publisher's introduction also pointed out that 'one thing emphasised [in the novel] was the role of several members of the Chinese descended community in the history of the Indonesian independence movement' (Sylado 1999: v). The novel was an immediate hit, went into a second imprint the very same year and was quickly adapted to a stage play and to a film the following year. The novel and the film, written and directed by non-Chinese Indonesians, seemed to be self-conscious reform era foil to the effective ban on the representation of any but the most trivialised and objectionable images of Chinese (and those very few and far between) in literature and cinema. The film, directed by Nia di Nata, was released with symbolic flourish on Chinese New Year's day in 2000, being celebrated legally for the first time in Indonesia after 35 years of being banned.

The story (and the film) is set in and around the colonial capital Batavia from about 1918 to immediately after independence. This history is re-cast by a middle-aged woman, Giok Lian (herself a very minor character in the novel and even less important in the film), brought up by adoptive Dutch parents in Holland, who returns to Indonesia to recover the story of her natural parents: her mother Tinung, a girl from a poor, rural Betawi¹⁸ background; her father Tan Peng Liang a super-wealthy Chinese tobacco trader, criminal and later arms-smuggler. Giok Lian finds an epic saga, of depravity on the one hand and heroism on the other, across generations and also a brother she did not know of, who is now a successful businessman in 1970s Indonesia.

While Tinung and Tan Peng Liang are married, most of the film deals with their separate and parallel lives. Through Tinung we see the underbelly of the colonial society: a young woman who has no capacity to survive except as a wife or courtesan (*ca-bau-kan*), sometimes protected, and at other times merely consumed by men. During the years of Japanese occupation of Indonesia (1942-45) she is pack-raped by Japanese soldiers. The film does not tell us how her life ends, as their story ends with the murder of Tan Peng Liang, the father of her children and the love of her life. I have written elsewhere (Sen, forthcoming) about the problematic representation of femininity in this film. But for the purposes of this paper, I want to focus on the story of Tan Peng Liang, the son of a wealthy Chinese businessman and an aristocratic Javanese woman.

Tan Peng Liang is at one level a scoundrel. He has inherited wealth, which he is willing to spend to buy the pleasures of the flesh. He is ruthless in his dealings with business rivals, corruptly scheming against them, bribing the Dutch

officials, threatening indigenous journalists and when necessary maiming and murdering opponents. The community of Chinese businessmen, whose machinations against Peng Liang takes up most of the first half of the film, is universally corrupt, ruthless and rich, with little empathy with the Indonesian population and its nationalist aspirations. They sell out to the Japanese to advance their petty individual interests. There is nothing in this construction that departs from the common stereotype of the Chinese community as living in a simultaneously isolated and sexually and economically exploitative relationship with the majority indigenous population. There is not one Chinese character in the film (even including the hero) who is not corrupt, ruthless and rich. The *pribumi* by contrast are normalised across the social spectrum: the poor, the prostitute, but also the incorruptible committed journalists, fearless young freedom fighters, the Javanese aristocrats.

The bitter rivalry, involving fraud, arson and murder, between the Batavia Chinese merchants and Tan Peng Liang lands the latter in jail. He escapes to mainland Southeast Asia, after bribing prison officers and faking his own death. From there, he engages his adult sons (from a previous marriage with a Chinese woman) in drug-smuggling, which brings him into contact with weapons smugglers working for leftist armed movements in Malaysia and Thailand. In another peculiarly characteristic stereotyping common in New Order discourse, the Chinese protagonist is simultaneously a ruthless capitalist but also in dangerous liaisons with communists.

Yet Tan Peng Liang is ultimately recuperated into honourable Indonesian citizenship. The roots of this recovery are in what he has inherited from his

Javanese mother. From time to time the film brings Peng Liang (and us as spectators) into the aristocratic, sophisticated and wealthy family of his mother's sister. His close fraternal relationship to his Javanese cousin, the urbane and gentle Sutardjo Rahardjo (Peng Liang calls him Mas, elder brother) ultimately draws Peng Liang into Indonesia's nationalist struggle, towards the end of the Japanese occupation and the Second World War. At the point of conversion to nationalism, Peng Liang talks about the love of land he has inherited from his mother. The novel provides the possibility of another history with the briefest mention of Tan Tiang Tjing, Peng Liang's father, who is engaged by the Japanese but who also works with the nationalist underground. The film makes no reference at all to Tiang Tjing. In the final quarter of the film Peng Liang plays a key part in smuggling in arms for an emerging nationalist army which is trying to resist the return of the Dutch after Japan's defeat in the war.

In independent Indonesia Peng Liang settles down with Tinung and their new-born son, as a successful banker. While there is no longer a trace of the corrupt ruthless adventurer, his success nonetheless seems clearly premised on his relation to his Javanese cousin and his nationalist friends, who now occupy high government offices.

Ca-bau-kan is more centrally about the Chinese Indonesians than any other film, not just in the New Order but in post-colonial Indonesia more generally. Against the thirty years of New Order exclusion of sons of Chinese fathers from inheriting Indonesian citizenship, *Ca-bau-kan* emphatically finds Tan Peng Liang a place in Indonesia's independence and in independent Indonesia. Yet the place it finds is just one very small space, that of a rich businessman, playing

'younger brother' to 'ethnic' Indonesian bureaucrats, while Chinese Indonesians, as a group, remain in the film, as in New Order popular and official discourse, demeaned and disenfranchised.

Race and representation

Robert Stam the foremost theorist of race in cinema has pointed out, much of the analysis of representation of race in cinema is engaged in finding 'stereotypes and distortions'

as if the "truth" of a community were unproblematic, transparent, and easily accessible, and "lies" about that community easily unmasked. Yet the issue is less one of fidelity to a pre-existing truth or reality, than one of a specific orchestration of ideological discourse and communitarian perspective. While at one level film is mimesis, representation, it is also utterance, an act of contextualised interlocation between socially situated producers and receivers.

(Stam 2000: 667)

The problem is not that *Ca-bau-kan* reproduces stereotypical or negative images of the Chinese Indonesians. The problem is quite the opposite – that through its exceptionally attractive protagonist and its spectacular imagery, it specularises and valorises the only legitimate identity available to Chinese Indonesians in the New Order, that is as corrupt, successful businessman, supporting the essentially indigenous national project. In post-Suharto Indonesia, if the son of a Chinese man can now be recuperated into Indonesian citizenship via the love for his

indigenous mother and his son's indigenous mother, then it is still only into a permanently second-class, politically muted, citizenship.

I have wondered what the most celebrated ethnic Chinese film maker of independent Indonesia, Teguh Karya, might have made of the freedom to represent his quest for identity in a time where it is possible to speak Chinese and about the Chinese publicly. He had had his first stroke before the end of the New Order and was deeply upset by stories of anti-Chinese violence that he heard in 1998. A film like *Ca-bau-kan* suggests that Indonesians can now make films that are centrally about Chinese Indonesians. The right to be represented having been re-reclaimed, the struggle must now be about how to be represented, by whom and for whose consumption.¹⁹

Notes

¹ This paper is dedicated to the memory of Teguh Karya, an Indonesian nationalist film-maker of great significance and to Bwee, who was with me on my last visit to Teguh after his second stroke. Only then did I give up my long held ambitions to discuss with him the subject matter of this paper.

² The 'New Order' was the self-proclaimed name of the authoritarian regime which ruled Indonesia from 1966 under the leadership of Major General Suharto, until his resignation on 21 May 1998.

³ Two recent studies which provide excellent reviews of existing research on Chinese Indonesians are worth mentioning here: Amy L. Freedman, 2000, chapter 4 and Filomeno V. Aguilar 2001.

⁴ The gendered language here is used advisedly: there were no camera-women working in commercial cinema until the mid-1990s.

⁵ Chinese Indonesians are commonly categorised into *Peranakan* and *Totok*, the latter referring to migrants born in China, as well as implying a greater cultural and racial distinctiveness. But these lines of demarcation are not always clear. Many of the essays in the book, *Perspectives on the Chinese Indonesians*, refer to the problems of distinguishing these groups in the context of contemporary politics (Godley and Lloyd 2001).

⁶ The statistical data here and through most of the first half of this essay are drawn from J.B. Kristianto's excellent film catalogue (Kristianto 1995). That catalogue itself, as the author explains in the introduction, is incomplete, because of large holes in the archival data on Indonesian cinema. Any actual figures in this essay, then, need to be treated as approximate rather than exact.

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the role that films played in the political dynamics of the decade leading up to the Suharto coup of October 1965 see Sen (1985).

⁸ For details of this law see Coppel (Coppel 2002: 31-47).

⁹ I have seen relatively few films from the pre-1965 period and have not seen most of the films referred to in this section. My work here and elsewhere on the early history of Indonesian cinema depends on reviews, scenarios and summaries in press, detailed references for which appear in Sen, 1994, (Chapter 2). I have also depended to a large degree on the summaries provided by JB Kristianto (1995). Reconstruction of film content on the basis of summaries is always unsatisfactory but, for reasons both technological and political, only a very small

number of pre-1965 films have survived. Fortunately secondary, written records seem to provide enough material for the kind of preliminary argument about the on-screen presence and disappearance of Chinese Indonesians being attempted in this paper.

¹⁰ As the identifiably Chinese roles disappeared, some of the actors survived appearing as non-ethnicised 'Indonesians'. Perhaps the most enduring star of Indonesian cinema was a woman of Chinese descent, Tan Kiem Nio, known by her stage and screen name Fifi Young, who dominated the screen from around 1940 and continued to be one of the most recognised on-screen faces well into the 1970s.

¹¹ It is worth noting that this naming of 'the Chinese problem' is not new to the New Order, but already in use prior to the Second World War, and indeed perhaps part of a wider post-colonial Asian discourse of 'minority problems', by its very wording shifting the burden of the problem to the minority.

¹² The parallel with the 'dwi-tunggal' (two-in-one) founders of the Indonesian nation is impossible to miss: Sukarno and Hatta founded the nation, Ismail and Malik founded national cinema. Anything prior to that is prehistory to be written off in a few paragraphs.

¹³ These erasures are not of course exclusive to cinema, and they are intertwined in complex ways that are not the subject of this paper. For a discussion of leftist film making in Indonesia and its destruction in the aftermath of the 1965 coup, see Sen 1994: chs. 2 and 3.

¹⁴ It is impossible to write about the media in Indonesia in the New Order period without mentioning the acronym SARA, which was used to refer to the types of conflict that the government censored out of the media: S=suku (ethnic), A=agama (religious), R=ras (racial), A=antar-golongan (literally 'between groups' but best read as inter-class). Ramifications of these restrictions have been variously discussed; for cinema in particular see Sen (1994: chs. 3,4 and 5) and Sen and Hill (2000, ch.5).

¹⁵ D. Djajakusuma, (1918-1987) dancer, film director and a significant cultural thinker in Indonesia since the early 1960s.

¹⁶ See for instance the section called 'Guruku, Sahabatku, Bapakku' (My Teacher, My Friend, My Father)', in Riantiarno (ed.) (1993) *Teguh Karya & Teater Populer, 1968-1993*, where 16 film and stage stars and directors write about their debt to Teguh.

¹⁷ For an account of the Java Wars and the historical significance of Diponegoro see Ricklefs 2001: 151-4. For a more detailed reading of the film, from a slightly different perspective, see Sen 1994: 83-6.

¹⁸ Betawi were the indigenous peasant population of the area which became the Dutch colonial capital in Indonesia. The ethnic Betawi population was marginalised from the wealth and metropolitan culture of the colonial and later national capital. In the 1990s there has been quite a lot of interest in recovering the stories of Betawi people in various forms of media texts, including some very popular television drama and comedy.

¹⁹ Since the writing of this paper, a new film based on the life and work of Soe Hok Gie, an Indonesian intellectual of Chinese descent, has been screened in Jakarta: *Gie*, directed by Riri Reza, produced by Miles Production. I have not had the opportunity to see the extent to which this film takes up the challenge of re-making Chinese identities in Indonesian cultural texts.

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