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## Imagining “Indonesia”: Ethnic Chinese Film Producers in Pre-Independence Cinema

Charlotte Setijadi-Dunn and Thomas Barker

### Introduction – *Darah dan Doa* as the Beginning of *Film Nasional*?

In his 2009 historical anthology of filmmaking in Java 1900-1950, prominent Indonesian film historian Misbach Yusa Biran writes that although production of locally made films began in 1926 and continued until 1949, these films were not based on national consciousness and therefore could not yet be called Indonesian films. He holds up Usmar Ismail’s *Darah dan Doa* (Blood and Prayers) (1950) as the first such film to reflect national consciousness and signal the genesis of Indonesian film history (2009:45). This glorification of Usmar Ismail’s *Darah dan Doa* as the first Indonesian film is not uncommon and can be found in many historical writings on the beginnings of Indonesia’s film industry (Said, 1991; Ardan, 1997; Abdullah, *et al.* 1993). Indeed, similar accounts of Indonesian cinematic history can even be found today whereby, in an opinion editorial written to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> ‘anniversary’ of Indonesian cinema, film enthusiast Nova Chairil (2010) writes that the 30<sup>th</sup> of March is when this film was “directed by an Indonesian native, produced by an Indonesian production house and shot in Indonesia,” thus marking this date as National Cinema Day.

However, in this paper, we argue that Biran’s and Chairil’s claims actually undermine the richness of Indonesia’s film history as they are based on a narrow definition of what constitutes “Indonesian films.” In reality, feature filmmaking in the Indonesian archipelago did not begin in 1950, but can be traced back more than two decades earlier when an Englishman and a German made *Loetoeng Kasaroeng* (1926), a silent film based on a West Javanese local legend.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, filmmaking was continued by a handful of ethnic Chinese – both *peranakan* and *totok*<sup>2</sup> – who popularized local stories and localized an array of already circulating stories and genres. Prominent among them were the Wong Brothers, who came from Shanghai and local producers The and Tan, both of whom were also cinema owners. The arrival of the Japanese in 1942 brought an end to this phase of filmmaking that had seen annual production rise to 30 titles in 1941 and relegated much of its cultural significance to history. With it, the pioneering role played by these early ethnic Chinese has been forgotten and even denigrated with the emergence of a generation of *pribumi* filmmakers post-1945.

As Krishna Sen argues, such bias in Indonesia’s cinematic history is premised on the emergence of “a self-consciously nationalist generation of *pribumi* or indigenous filmmakers” (2006:173), of whom Usmar Ismail is the

most celebrated figure. His film *Darah dan Doa* (literally Blood and Prayers) follows the *Siliwangi* Division as they march from East Java back to their base in West Java through the perspective of its commander. Not only does the film supposedly portray the “national personality” (Biran, 2009:45), the director claimed that the film was made “with no commercial consideration whatsoever; it was pure idealism” (Ismail as quoted in Said, 1991:51). Thus *Darah dan Doa* became the prime example of what the ideal Indonesian film should look like: nationalistic, idealistic, and indigenous. This ideological conception of what constitutes Indonesian films – or *film nasional* as they became popularly known (see Barker in this edition) – has continued to dominate the frameworks of Indonesian cinematic history until now, resulting in the marginalization of Indonesian films made in the pre-independence era by non-indigenous filmmakers.

Indeed, anathema to the supposedly idealist film nasional is commercial filmmaking, which is associated with escapism and the entertainment films of Hollywood and Hong Kong. In popular historical accounts of Indonesian cinema, ethnic Chinese producers are seen as having introduced and perpetuated this commercial modus operandi, or as Salim Said calls it, the industry’s “original sin” (1991 [1975]:22). Writing in 1951, film figure Asrul Sani contends that:

It is the case that the film producers in Indonesia are nothing other than those who prioritise their wallets and do not consider, or have intentions to, establish anything worthy of being valued. We should not doubt this anymore. It can be said: all of them are Chinese (1997:302).<sup>3</sup>

As a consequence of this kind of logic, Chinese filmmakers were synonymous with commercialism, and thus not film nasional. Moreover, when ethnic Chinese film producers did make films that attempted to portray local narratives and cultures, their films are labelled as opportunist, “devoid of idealism,” with storylines and imageries that just “*comot sana-sini*” (pluck things from here and there) (Biran, 2009b:68).

Undeniably, one of the biggest lacunae in Indonesian cinematic history is the fact that even now, little is known of the roles played by ethnic Chinese filmmakers in the establishment of Indonesia’s film industry. Although it is true that most Indonesian film historians agree that ethnic Chinese finance provided crucial support for the film industry throughout its history, ethnic Chinese cinematic legacy in areas outside of their usual economic roles remains under-researched. In many ways, this gap in the literature is surprising given that ethnic Chinese investors and filmmakers had virtually laid the foundations of local filmmaking and drove the industry from the late 1920s until the Japanese occupation in 1942, when most Chinese businesses were forced to close down. Official New Order ethnic policies only furthered this erasure of the Chinese and the historical myopia towards their role in Indonesian history (see Coppel, 1983; Suryadinata, 1992).

In this paper, we aim to re-examine the roles of ethnic Chinese filmmakers in Indonesian cinematic history as a preliminary study in the reconsideration of the early years of the film industry. Here, we regard the simplification of ethnic Chinese history in the film industry as part of a broader attempt by nationalist and New Order ideologues to “appropriate” the origins of cinema and “national culture” in Indonesia. On the same note, we argue that the narrative tradition that privileges “indigenous” filmmakers as the originators of *asli* (authentic or true) Indonesian culture on screen reflects the dominant yet narrow definition of nationalism as based on ethnic and cultural primordialism. We challenge this common historical construction and assert that in the first decades of Indonesian cinema, ethnic Chinese filmmakers played pivotal roles in forming the images of Indonesian culture and peoples on screen.

We will begin with a brief outline of the film industry from the early 1920s when ethnic Chinese investors, film theatre owners, and filmmakers popularized cinema as a form of public entertainment. Here, we suggest that one of the key factors behind ethnic Chinese<sup>4</sup> filmmakers’ success in popularizing cinema was their ability to integrate popular narratives and styles from local cultural practices such as *toneel* and *kerontjong* music (local folk music style that has strong Portuguese, Hawaiian, and Malay influences) into films. We will then look at the subsequent development of locally made films in the hands of prominent ethnic Chinese filmmakers who brought film technologies and stylistic influences from international cultural centers such as Hollywood and Shanghai to the Indies.<sup>5</sup> During this developmental stage, ethnic Chinese filmmakers had to appeal to both indigenous and ethnic Chinese audiences from various societal classes, so they experimented with many genres and themes, combining local narratives and images with international styles in order to satisfy different target markets. As a result, early local films were diverse, cosmopolitan, and projected an image of an Indonesia that is complex, idiosyncratic, and unique, yet connected to global flows and modern practices. We argue that such an image of Indonesia is different from later insular indigenist imaginings of Indonesian belonging.

As the creators of the first locally made films, ethnic Chinese filmmakers produced some of the first visual images of the East Indies landscapes and peoples. These films for the first time portrayed the peoples of the Indies as a diverse people who possess their own stories and tastes. Through early local films such as *Si Tjonat* (a film about a character of the same name, 1930), *Terang Boelan* (Full Moon, 1937), *Impian di Bali* (Dreams in Bali, 1939), and *Rentjong Atjeh* (Acehnese *Rentjong*, 1940), audiences began to project themselves into visual imaginings of Indonesia. “These outsiders,” as Heider refers to the Chinese, “were responsible for creating the image of the common Indonesian culture” (1994:170).

From this perspective, early ethnic Chinese filmmakers as cosmopolitan cultural brokers were crucial in the development of a pre-independence sense

of national consciousness through cinematic visualization. We argue that it is precisely because ethnic Chinese producers portrayed a different image of Indonesia than one imagined by ethno-nationalist ideologues that their films become labelled as “un-Indonesian.” In reality, however, we suggest that ethnic Chinese filmmakers gave the people of the Indies their first cinematic visualization of what Indonesia was; a pastiche of local images and narratives drawn from various local sources, heavily influenced by international cultural flows. The Indonesia imagined in ethnic Chinese produced films was one that represented the different layers of Indies society at a time when native, Chinese, Dutch, and other peoples and cultures coexisted. Although such an image of Indonesia was eventually lost and replaced by ethno-nationalist visions of a single, unitary national identity, we contend that this aspect of Indonesia’s cinematic history needs to be revisited and reconsidered. Only then will we be able to understand the evolution of Indonesian cinema as a social and political medium, and one that reflects the socio-political and ideological shifts that have occurred in Indonesia’s life as a nation.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Acculturatie, Theatre, and Early Indies Cinema***

It is useful to return to accounts of cultural life in Dutch East Indies in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Hildred Geertz describes an “Indonesian metropolitan superculture” characterized by “the colloquial everyday use of the Indonesian language, and directly associated with this language are the new Indonesian literature, popular music, films, and historical and political writings” (1963:17). Notable too were the peripatetic forms of theatre and performance, locally known as *Komedi Stamboel*,<sup>7</sup> that toured the metropolitan centers to great popular enjoyment (Cohen 2006). Groups came from overseas and originated locally, adding to a sense of international vibrancy. Film screenings often accompanied these performances as mobile cinema, and later filmmaking efforts drew from this world of theatre or popular literature of the period (Siegel, 1997; Cohen, 2006).

Ethnic Chinese were already heavily involved in these forms of popular culture. One of the most prolific writers of the period, Njoo Cheong Seng, moved into theatre via the Miss Riboet group and then into film in the 1930s writing and directing *Kris Mataram* (1940) and *Zoebaidah* (1940) (Chandra, 2009). More generally, theatre and subsequently film companies were typically owned and operated by an ethnic Chinese boss, with actors, technicians, and musicians drawn from a variety of ethnic and social groups. Later, many ethnic Chinese moved into cinemas and importing films, especially as film became an economically viable business (Pané, 1953:15).<sup>8</sup> This reflected both the prominence of the ethnic Chinese in the cultural life of the Indies and their relative economic importance.

In the first major study of Indonesian film, Armijn Pané uses the concept

of *acculturatie* (acculturation) to describe the modern cultural forms of theatre and film in pre-war Indonesia. He defines *acculturatie* as “the mixing of a variety of international and pan-Asian sources.”<sup>9</sup> Here, Pané elaborates further:

In short, theatre can be said to represent the acculturation between the techniques and composition of European theatre and opera in around 1900, with the technique and composition of Malay theatre already in existence and which had been influenced by India and Persia. The combination of the two was orchestrated by local Europeans with the general public in Indonesia at the time (Pané, 1953:8).<sup>10</sup>

This he argued helped as an integrating force of the nation, and is markedly distinct from later primordial theories of the Indonesian nation.

Much of what distinguished theatre in pre-independence Indonesia carried over into film. Cohen (2006) in his comprehensive study of the *Komedie Stamboel*, notes how it captured the unique social and cultural formations of the Indies at the turn of the century. Theatre, he argues, was the domain of a “modern worldview” premised on a cosmopolitan outlook, distinct from more traditional forms, such as *wayang* (Cohen, 2006:344). This was partly due to its variety of practitioners and their ability to combine diverse cultural influences. Early films for popular consumption employed similar stories and styles, employing people from the stage to make films. In Pané’s work, the theatre is very much the precursor to film.

Film encapsulated Indies aspirations to modernity in both its imagery and technology. Early film is regarded as a modern medium, with its ability to present the world as image to large audiences through processes of mechanical reproduction (Hansen, 1995). Moreover, given that “cinema was international before it was national” (Gunning, 2008:11), it was associated with an emerging global circulation of images and stories, itself linked to an early world culture. In this regard, as the Dutch were more focused on the ethnographic representation of their colony (de Klerk, 2008), it became the local Chinese who developed a fictional representation of the Indies. They were clearly influenced by both Hollywood films, but also films from Shanghai which were first imported in 1924 (Arief, 2010:20).

While these Chinese films (still silent) were intended for local Chinese audiences, film had been from its arrival accessible to all racial groups and indeed attracted a significant pribumi audience (Arief, 2010). Local historians make much of the fact that early screenings had separate admission prices and seating for Europeans, Chinese, and pribumi, using it as evidence that racial segregation was practiced and that the Chinese occupied a comprador and relatively privileged position (Ardan, 1992:7; Abdullah, *et al.*, 1993:50). Yet this also means that films were open to anyone who could afford to watch, and although expensive, they were not off limits to pribumi audiences. As a result, by 1926 almost 80 percent of the cinema-going audiences were pribumi and Chinese (Arief, 2010:20) with a growing awareness that the local Malay (Indonesian) speaking audiences constituted the biggest potential audiences for the cinemas.

## Imagining “Indonesian” Landscapes, Cultures, and Peoples in Pre-Independence Films

By the early 1930s, the Indies film industry was well established with up to seven films produced each year. However, the themes and storylines of these films vary greatly as filmmakers experimented with consumer tastes. The newness of cinema in the Indies meant that filmmakers had a lot of room to try different styles, but at the same time, very little is known about the kinds of stories and formats that would appeal to different audience segments. It needs to be remembered that even within generalized audience categories like the indigenous and Chinese audiences, there are also complex internal segmentations. For instance, among the Chinese audiences, there are the totok and peranakan groups who differed in cultural orientations, languages, and tastes in films (see Biran, 2009; Nio, 1941). Likewise, within the indigenous market, there are different regional affiliations, levels of education, and cultural orientations. As a consequence, many films failed among different audience segments and filmmakers ran the risk of bankruptcy with each film. Nevertheless, this experimental stage also meant that films produced cover wide-ranging themes and reflected the diversity of the multi-faceted and multi-ethnic Indies society of the time (Pané, 1953).

In the hands of ethnic Chinese filmmakers, early Indies film combined Hollywood and Shanghainese cinematic styles with local stories and theatre styles, creating a uniquely “Indies” film style that painted a picture of a cosmopolitan and hybrid people. In films such as *Si Tjonat* (a film about a character of the same name, 1930), *Terang Boelan* (Full Moon, 1937), *Impian di Bali* (Dreams in Bali, 1939), and *Rentjong Atjeh* (Acehnese *Rentjong*, 1940), we can see examples of how ethnic Chinese filmmakers combined local narratives and *toneel* theatre styles with foreign cinematic influences like the martial arts theatrics commonly found in Mandarin films. Indeed, these kinds of idiosyncratic and rather fantastical films proved to be popular, particularly among lower class indigenous audiences who found the style to be entertaining (see Said, 1991). More importantly however, these films are always set in the local landscape, using a combination of both indigenous and ethnic Chinese actors, and spoken or at least subtitled in the Malay language.<sup>11</sup> This is true for even when ethnic Chinese filmmakers make Mandarin-style martial arts films or films based on Chinese folklore.

Looking more closely at the majority of pre-independence films, it can indeed be seen that ethnic Chinese filmmakers tried very hard to portray images of local – albeit exoticized – Indies cultures in their films. One good example of this can be seen in the 1940 film *Kris Mataram* (Mataram Keris), directed by Njoo Cheong Seng. Although unfortunately, no copies of the actual film survived from 1940, the film’s storyline, reviews, and promotional materials

reveal much about Indies culture and society in the film. The film's storyline tells the story of a young aristocratic Central Javanese woman's struggle (played by Fifi Young) in negotiating between tradition and modernity. A review at the time pointed out the film's message that: "The end of the story is a fair conclusion, that there is nothing wrong about tradition or modernity."<sup>12</sup> This is a timely topic for the Indies society that was, at the time, still configuring its own character amidst colonial cultural influences and the pull of Western-style modernity (see also Biran, 2009; Kristianto, 2007). However, it is the film's promotional poster that provides a more interesting example of cultural mixing.

The *Kris Mataram* poster featured a collage of images, names, languages, and marketing propositions drawn from a number of local and foreign cultures. A big photo of Fifi Young, the film's ethnic Chinese lead actress dressed in Central Javanese *lurik kebaya* is placed at the center, with the film's title, *Kris Mataram*, written in a Javanese style font on the backdrop of a Javanese *keris* (traditional Javanese blade). The general background of the poster is a *batik parang* motif from Central Java contrasted with still images of scenes from the movie on celluloid films framing the left and right hand side of the poster. The film advertised that the film is *bitjara menjanji Melajoe* (spoken and sung in Malay), that it features over nine popular *keroncong* songs, and that seven of the film's stars are former toneel stars. The words on the poster itself are written in a combination of Malay and Dutch languages, as is the norm of the

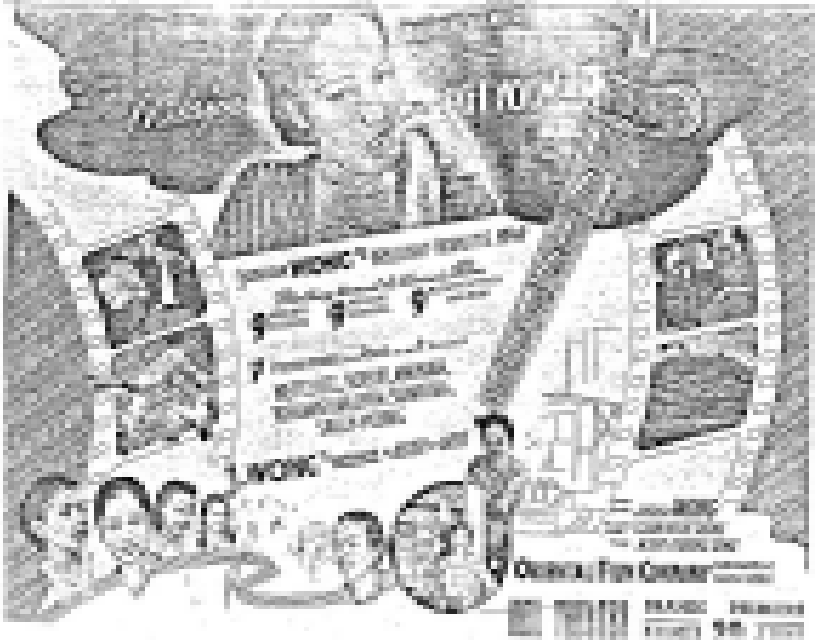


Fig. 1. Promotional posters for *Kris Mataram*.

time. Images of the old and the new, traditional and modern, Javanese culture,



and ethnic Chinese film stars are all combined to create an image of local and international icons set in modern visual culture.

The kind of pastiche imagery presented on the *Kris Mataram* poster can also be seen in other film posters, such as the 1939 pirate action adventure, *Rentjong Atjeh* (Acehnese Rencong) and the 1937 drama musical, *Terang*



Fig. 2. Promotional posters for *Kris Mataram*.

*Boelan* (Full Moon).

Fig. 3. Promotional posters for *Rentjong Atjeh*.

In both these films, it is evident that the same kind of cultural mixing can be found, with images of exotic landscapes, along with almost primitive-looking indigenous peoples wearing traditional garments such as batik and *ulos* set in scenes that resemble successful Hollywood musicals that portray the exotic landscapes of Hawaii or the South Pacific. Although the pseudo-Western-gaze found in these imageries is heavily criticized by later film historians such as



Biran and Said as un-nationalistic copies of Hollywood films, these images actually represent an important yet often forgotten stage in Indonesia's film history. This period is where the predominantly ethnic Chinese Indies film producers are starting to figure out the flavor of Indonesian films, and part of the process is to Indonesianize Western and other foreign film styles to create a unique Indies look.

Fig. 4. Promotional posters for *Rentjong Atjeh*.

Having said that, however, it is important to also acknowledge that images of the Indies found in many of these ethnic Chinese produced films are heavily essentialized and with strong Orientalist undertones. For instance, in *Terang Boelan*, the indigenous population are shown to be wearing batik cloths, wearing flowers in their hair, and living an island/primitive lifestyle as found in Hollywood films like *The Jungle Princess* (1936). Similarly, in other films like *Impian di Bali* (1939), local characters are almost always seen



wearing traditional clothing like kebaya or local headdresses, and traditional music like *gamelan* are always playing in the background as musical score. Although to fully analyze the Orientalist tendencies of these films would be beyond the scope of this paper, we suggest that these essentialized images are practical means for which ethnic Chinese filmmakers imagine a distinct Indies image on screen. Indeed, capturing the immensely diverse imagery of the Indonesian archipelago on film necessarily involves a process of reduction and self-essentialism. However, what is important here is that this Orientalizing of the Indies on film can be seen as part of an attempt to place the Indies within the global flow of cinematic cultural exchange. In her 2006 article, Aihwa Ong argues that such moves to strategically “self-Orientalize” is not uncommon, and can be understood as a deliberate tactic by colonial subjects to self-represent and reclaim agency in Western hegemonic projects (p. 135). This means that by Indonesianizing foreign films and portraying unique – albeit essentialized

– images of the Indies as a distinct culture, ethnic Chinese producers created a niche for Indies films. William van der Heide draws a similar conclusion when he suggests that:

The production of the film *Terang Boelan* (Full Moon) in 1937 represented a consolidation of this tendency towards ‘Indonesianization’, and also heralded a new direction for Indonesian film (2002:128).

From this light, the tendency to Indonesianize storylines and images in early films is in fact an important step in the development of later Indonesian films.

It was also during this time that film producers began to construct the face of Indonesians on screen.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps ironically, some of the best-known Indies actors and actresses of the 1930s and 1940s were ethnic Chinese. Names such as Fifi Young, Ferry Kok, and Tan Tjeng Bok were names associated with Indies films and celebrity. Fifi Young, in particular, is an interesting case, whereby this young Aceh-born ethnic Chinese woman (whose Chinese name is Tan Kim Nio), became the face of demure, feminine Indies beauty in films. She wore Javanese kebaya (traditional Javanese dress that would eventually become the national dress for Indonesian women) in *Kris Mataram*, Timorese traditional dress in *Zoebaida* (1940), and in later films, she played the archetypal modern Indonesian woman that represented both tradition and modernity. She, along with many of her contemporaries, had international appeal, appearing in Malaysia, Singapore, and beyond.

Through the imagery in their films, choice of actors, and use of the Malay language, ethnic Chinese filmmakers picked bits and pieces of both local and international cultural influences to create their visual interpretation of Indonesian culture. Although perhaps their representations and techniques were not perfect, they were indeed the first images of what Indonesia as a people looked like on screen.

In this analysis, it is important to also acknowledge that the strategy of *comot sana-sini* or picking bits and pieces of various local cultures may have come about due to a number of reasons. For one, such efforts may be directed towards increasing the films’ relevance among lower-class indigenous audiences who wanted to see aspects of their own cultures on screen. This of course is also linked to the growing societal demands of the time to portray a more unitary culture of Indonesia that is drawn from various local and international sources. However, it must also be remembered that because these films were the first locally made films that attempted to portray local cultures, there were just simply no reference points regarding how Indies culture should be portrayed in films. This is perhaps true, remembering that many ethnic Chinese producers like the Wong brothers are first generation migrants from China who must construct what they perceive to be Indies indigenous cultures based on essentialized images of well-known local cultural groups. Nevertheless, regardless of their reasoning, as the pioneers of Indies filmmaking, ethnic Chinese producers significantly contributed to the formulation of what Cohen (2006) calls a



Fig. 5. Fifi Young as the girl from Solo in *Kris Mataram*.

“unique *Indische* culture.” In its further development, it is precisely this image of a unique, singular “superculture” that is heavily integrated into the proto-nationalist movement of the 1940s.

Nio Joe Lan, an ethnic Chinese film historian, writes in 1941 that through early local films, people of the Indies for the first time came to the realization that Indies narratives and landscapes were not in any way inferior to the West (1941:18). Portrayals of local stories nurtured a sense of belonging and self-reflection among the people, particularly amid the then growing sense of

national awakening and independence. Yet, at the same time, it must also be remembered that the interconnectivity of regional cultural flows at the time meant that local films made by ethnic Chinese filmmakers were also consumed overseas. By the 1930s, Indies films were already highly regarded in regions around the Malacca Strait such as Singapore and Malaya (now Malaysia), and even in China. Films such as *Terang Boelan* (1937) were regionally acclaimed for their high quality that could almost match Hollywood produced films. Here, Nio argues that the screening of Indies films overseas showcased the beauty and characteristics of the archipelago that helped shape international perception of the Indies and its people (1941:18). The psychological effect of this international recognition, according to Nio, was a feeling of pride among the people of the Indies who were at this stage beginning to understand themselves as part of a larger, more unitary Indonesia.

It is through ethnic Chinese filmmakers’ ability to combine the local and the cosmopolitan that the people of the Indies were able to not only see themselves on screen, but also feel a sense of participation in greater spheres of regional and Western style modernity. However, it is ironic that it is precisely their cosmopolitan outlook and connections that made ethnic Chinese producers dangerous to the budding ethno-nationalist ideologies of the new Indonesian nation from the mid-1940s onwards.

### **Ethnic Chinese Film Producers as      Cosmopolitan Cultural Mediators**

As mentioned earlier, throughout postcolonial Indonesian history, the perception of ethnic Chinese “foreignness” have made them “essential Others”

## 'STAR OF INDONESIA'



MRS. FIFI YOUNG, Chinese film, radio and stage star and leading lady of the show "Stars of Indonesia 1951" which will arrive in Singapore on Saturday for performances at the Happy World.

Fig. 6. Fifi Young appears in Singapore  
(*The Straits Times*,  
Nov. 21, 1950, p. 5)

in the Indonesian nation state and its national identity based on indigeneity. Because of this, Chinese Indonesians are rarely regarded as active agents in the processes of nation making. As Karen Strassler argues, this paradigm has meant that ethnic Chinese are always treated as a discrete group, separate from local indigenous communities (2009:398). Moreover, their cosmopolitanism has largely been regarded as a foreign liability rather than an asset to the Indonesian nation. Yet scholars have increasingly investigated the ways in which translocal imaginings fostered and disseminated by cosmopolitan actors have themselves been integral to the making of nationalisms and national imaginaries (Robbins, 1998; Sidel, 2003; Cheah, 2007). In the colonial Indies as a cosmopolitan and multicultural hub, ethnic Chinese cosmopolitanism meant that they are in the position to localize translocal trends that in hindsight helped local subjects explore new ways in which to imagine themselves.

It is true that in their capacity as cultural brokers, ethnic Chinese filmmakers like the Wong (who migrated to the Indies as adults from Shanghai) and The brothers (who were born in the Indies but spent time in Shanghai to study) played a unique and rather privileged role in the creation of

national culture on screen. Their position as first-generation migrants made them both an insider and outsider to Indies society that, in hindsight, perhaps gave them greater liberty in imagining and constructing visual imageries of the Indies and its people. As newcomers to the Indies who brought along foreign technologies and capital, it is safe to assume that ethnic Chinese filmmakers possess greater access to regional and international cultural flows than most people in the Indies. In terms of cinematic influences alone, it is evident from films like the island musical *Terang Boelan* (1937) and the martial arts *Tie Pat Kai Kawin* (The Marriage of Tie Pat Kai, 1935) that ethnic Chinese film producers were up-to-date with foreign film styles from Hollywood and Shanghai. Although this transnational connectivity is advantageous in that it gave the ethnic Chinese filmmakers knowledge of modern technological and cultural influences from abroad that they can include in their films, it is also a

disadvantage in that it gave non-Chinese Indies subjects reason to be suspicious of their multiple belongings. This is particularly so, remembering the long-running historical perception among Indies natives of the Chinese as foreign Orientals and economic opportunists who are located outside of indigenous society (see Coppel, 1983; Reid and Chirot, 1997).

Indeed, ethnic Chinese migrants and sojourners in Southeast Asia have been the subject of much research that explore their often difficult positions as capital and cultural traders who possess no roots in their new localities (see Riemenschmitter and Madsen, 2009; Cheah, 2007; Tu, 1994). Nevertheless, even though this rootlessness meant that most Chinese cosmopolitans never achieve a state of belonging wherever they go, Ong (2006) argues that it gives them greater adaptability to cope with changing socio-political circumstances. This is certainly the case with ethnic Chinese filmmakers where, perhaps just as important as their ability to combine various cultural influences, they were also adaptive to the different political and social changes that were happening in the Indies at the time. For instance, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, ethnic Chinese producers such as The Teng Chun and Ang Hock Liem started to work together more intensively with indigenous partners and actors such as Andjar Asmara, and Dr. A.K. Gani (one of the signatories of the historic “Sumpah Pemuda” or the “Youth Oath” in 1928) in films such as *Asmara Moerni* (True Romance, 1940) and *Panggilan Darah* (The Call of the Blood, 1941). Whereas Biran (2009) dismisses such moves as marketing ploys intended to give the film industry a sense of association with the increasingly popular independence movement, they are nevertheless real attempts to both popularize local films and make Indonesian films relevant to the national mood of the time.

Regardless of their origins and roots, perhaps ethnic Chinese filmmakers’ biggest contribution to Indonesian national culture (both on and off cinema screen) is that through their films, the people of the Indies had reference images with which to conceive of themselves as a society, a people, and, eventually, a nation. Portrayals of the Indies in ethnic Chinese produced films – however imperfect or inaccurate – represent an interpretation of society and its surroundings that reveal much about the realities of life and common aspirations of the time. In this regard, ethnic Chinese filmmakers are not dissimilar to ethnic Chinese authors writing in Chinese Malay (a now superseded language attributed as an earlier form of Bahasa Indonesia) who according to Claudine Salmon (1981) and Dede Oetomo (1991) contributed to the shaping of the national cultural imagination through their popular literary interpretations of Indies society.

As migrants and cosmopolitans influenced by regional cultural flows, ethnic Chinese filmmakers painted a picture of Indonesia that is not defined by ethnicity, political affiliations, or an obsession towards nationalism based on indigeneity. The Indonesia seen in ethnic Chinese produced films is one where the collective whole is characterized by idiosyncrasy. It is by and large

an Indonesia composed of a *mélange* of people and cultures, often as composite characters or identities, imagined as part of an interconnected regional (and global) network. However, it is ironic that it is this cosmopolitan outlook that made ethnic Chinese producers dangerous to the budding ethno-nationalist ideologies of the new Indonesian nation from the mid-1940s onwards. At a time when the Indies society was looking to define itself as a nation free from colonial oppression, perhaps such a cosmopolitan and accommodating image of Indonesia was too dangerously close to a sense of foreignness associated to colonial imperialist powers. Indeed, by 1942, the end of Dutch colonialism of the Indies, followed by the arrival of the Japanese, brought with it dramatic social, political, and ideological changes that would forever affect Indonesia's national film industry.

After Japanese forces closed down a large number of ethnic Chinese businesses and banned the operations of all private film companies, ethnic Chinese filmmakers were excluded from the highly controlled film industry. Moreover, through centralized cultural organizations such as the Keimin Bunka Sidhosho (the Central Arts Office), the Japanese taught young indigenous men such as Usmar Ismail the art and organization of filmmaking that were stylistically different from how ethnic Chinese producers conducted business (Biran, 2009; Sen, 1994; Pané, 1953). A major difference is that under the Japanese, cost control and profit maximization were also not major concerns. Furthermore, much more than simply teaching filmmaking techniques, the Japanese taught local filmmakers how they could use films for political purposes (see Kurasawa, 1987). Most importantly, however, was the Japanese's emphasis on ethno-nationalism that strengthened already existing sentiments among many involved in the Indonesian nationalist movement.

This indigenization of the film industry gave indigenous filmmakers a sense of ownership and pride in thinking that the only true Indonesian films are those that reflect national character as well as indigenous cultural and moral values. As Said argues, although the Japanese only produced a handful of war propaganda films throughout their occupation, what changed the most were indigenous filmmakers' attitudes toward film and filmmaking in a way "radically different from the past" (1991:36). By this time period, popular perception on how the Indonesian nation should be portrayed cinematically had also changed dramatically. The hybrid and cosmopolitan narratives and imageries of pre-Japanese films were regarded as Western-influenced, not educative, and "inauthentic." In 1954, Usmar Ismail explained why such a paradigm shift occurred:

The atmosphere during the Japanese Occupation stimulated growth and change in the content as well as the techniques of filmmaking. It was under the Japanese that people became aware of the function of film and the awakening of the (Indonesian) language ... Film began to mature and to be infused with a greater sense of national consciousness. (p. 30)

This new fervour for capturing the "authentic" essence of Indonesianness



became an obsession for young filmmakers like Ismail who considered ethnic Chinese and Dutch produced films as “soulless” (1954:31). Under this new ethno-nationalist focus in filmmaking, ethnic Chinese filmmakers also became considered as foreigners and outsiders who did not understand “national values” and could only therefore make exploitative commercial films.

In the post-independence era following the Japanese defeat, ethnic Chinese film producers suddenly found themselves outside of the new *industri film nasional* (national film industry) dominated by indigenous filmmakers such as Usmar Ismail and Djamaluddin Malik. In films such as *Darah dan Doa* (1950), the Indonesia portrayed on screen is significantly different to that seen in ethnic Chinese films such as *Kris Mataram*. No longer was Indonesia a hybrid, cosmopolitan place. The Indonesia of *Darah dan Doa* is one where its citizens look inwards towards the project of nationalism as embodied in the physical and ideological struggle of the military. From 1950 onwards, although most ethnic Chinese filmmakers resurrected their film companies in the 1950s, they became marginalized players in the film industry who mainly stayed behind the scenes as financiers (see Sen, 1994). Subsequently, the legacy of ethnic Chinese filmmakers in the pre-independence era became forgotten and distorted, their vision of Indonesia replaced with one that is more aligned to the nationalist ideologies of the New Order government in particular. Such historical erasure has also meant that ethnic Chinese filmmakers have been robbed of their rightful place as the creators of the first visual conceptions of Indonesia upon which subsequent images of national culture on screen were based.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have attempted to reveal another side to the history of film production in Indonesia, usually described as pre-nationalist, commercial and thus not worthy of consideration. We began with Biran’s 2009 historical anthology of Indonesian films that maintained that local films made before 1950 cannot be truly regarded as “Indonesian films” (2009:45). In response to this assertion, we have suggested that this position is indicative of a widespread ethno-nationalist bias that produces a narrow historiography of Indonesian films. We have demonstrated that the consequence of this bias meant that pre-independence films made by ethnic Chinese filmmakers are largely labelled as “not Indonesian films.” Over time, the legacies of earlier ethnic Chinese filmmakers like the Wong brothers and The Teng Chun became lost, their memories overshadowed by the famous names of indigenous and nationalist filmmakers such as Usmar Ismail and Djamaluddin Malik, who during New Order rule, became known as the forefathers of Indonesian cinema.

Crucially, we have been critical of this common tendency among Indonesian film historians to dismiss the significant contribution made by ethnic Chinese filmmakers, who not only pioneered feature filmmaking in Indonesia, but also constructed the first images of Indonesian landscapes, peoples, and cultures on screen.

Although only a preliminary inquiry in this direction – and sadly with the original films themselves unavailable for more in-depth content analysis – it is nevertheless perceptible that pre-independence films made by ethnic Chinese filmmakers presented early images of an imagined common Indies culture in which they too belonged. Film, more than any other medium, provided the machinery for this representation of Indonesia as a nation composed of a cultural melange that had come together through a process of acculturation. This may not represent the realities of everyday life as lived and experienced by colonial subjects, but it gave a sense of the Indonesia that many aspired to: a multiethnic, idiosyncratic society imagined as part of a regional (and global) cultural network, and participating in the exciting sphere of Western modernity.

Moreover, this paper was intended as a beginning to a comprehensive re-examination of Indonesia's subaltern film histories largely forgotten or misunderstood. Indeed, as we have discussed earlier, most writings on Indonesian cinematic history tend to begin the chronology of Indonesian films with the production of Usmar Ismail's *Darah dan Doa* in 1950, as though the local film industry had no meaningful precursors up to this point. What we are proposing is a change of paradigm in Indonesian film historiography, whereby local filmmaking in the Indonesian archipelago (from the arrival of film technology in the early 1900s until now) is seen as a long line of interconnected stages that form a historical continuity. Here, we argue that it is important to take into serious account the contributions of ethnic Chinese – as well as other, mainly Eurasian – filmmakers, actors, and film workers in the shaping of Indonesian films as we know today, both technically and stylistically.<sup>14</sup> Although it is true that the Indonesia visualized in pre-independence films is different from the Indonesia portrayed in post-independence films, we argue that such differences do not mean that one is a truer representation than the other. Rather, the differences merely point to different ways in which Indonesia is imagined by different cultural agents, operating in different time periods, and under different socio-political circumstances and ideologies. When viewed in this light, the definition of what constitutes true Indonesian films is then no longer restricted to insular, nationalist leniencies.

Through its tumultuous history, the ways in which Indonesia has been imagined and defined have been the subject of much debate and subject to prevailing political ideologies. Film has often been at the center of this ideological contestation about what Indonesia is and how it is to be represented. Sen (1983; 1985) pioneered the recovery of subaltern film histories of the 1950s and 1960s by retelling the stories and legacy of LEKRA and leftist

filmmakers who were silenced and extinguished in the New Order's rise to power. Similarly, the period before independence, we have argued, needs to be reconsidered as constituting a valid period of film production in the country and to challenge the simplistic and essentialist ideas of the ethnic Chinese in the formation of modern Indonesia. Such re-examination of history would be timely, especially remembering that in the past few years, ethnic Chinese filmmakers have begun to reappear in the Indonesian cinema scene, producing films that have prompted researchers to ask more questions regarding ethnic Chinese histories in modern Indonesia.<sup>15</sup> We hope that future research in this direction can shed more light, not just into how Indonesia is visually imagined on film, but also the agents that played significant roles in the cinema industry.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Documentaries had been made before this date but by the Dutch with the intention of documenting their colony, especially for consumption back in the Netherlands. See de Klerk (2008).
- <sup>2</sup> *Totok* Chinese are generally regarded as ethnic Chinese who still have strong ties to Mainland Chinese – may it be familial, collegial, political, or cultural – and still uphold traditional Chinese traditions. *Peranakan* Chinese, on the other hand, are generally regarded as acculturated Chinese who have developed their own unique culture in the Indies and are no longer culturally or politically oriented towards Mainland China. For more on this distinction, see Charles Coppel (1983), Leo Suryadinata (1992), and Donald Willmott (1960).
- <sup>3</sup> Sani (1997). Original reads: “Bahwa produser-produser film di Indonesia adalah semata-mata mereka yang hanya memikirkan kantong dan tidak menimbang atau bermaksud untuk mendirikan sesuatu yang patut diberi harga tinggi, tidak usah disangsikan lagi. Boleh dikatakan: semua mereka adalah orang Tionghoa.”
- <sup>4</sup> Although most of these ethnic Chinese were *peranakan*, that is assimilated ethnic Chinese, there were also numerous *totoks* working in these fields. We have kept the term ethnic Chinese to cover both these groups.
- <sup>5</sup> The term “the Indies” will be used to refer to the pre-independence colonial Dutch East Indies as opposed to the term “Indonesia” in reference to the post-colonial nation.
- <sup>6</sup> While we are only looking at the pre-Independence films in this paper, this notion of cosmopolitan film provides a fecund theoretical ground for considering later works to trace many of the transnational connections that are not considered by proponents of *film nasional*.
- <sup>7</sup> *Komedi* was derived from the *Komedi* genre of theatre and vaudeville popular in Europe. *Stamboel* referred to Istanbul and the use of Arabic stories, especially *1001 Nights*.
- <sup>8</sup> Similar ideas of the plurality of Indonesian social and political life before

- independence and thus a critique of the homogenous vision of indigenous nationalism can be found in van Doorn (1987) and O'Malley (1980).
- <sup>9</sup> Original in Indonesian: “*bermatjam-matjam sumber internasional dan inter-asiatic jang dipergunakan*” (Pané, 1953:8).
- <sup>10</sup> Original in Indonesian: “*Dengan pendek, tonil dapat dikatakan merupakan acculturatie antara tehnik serta susunan tonil dan opera Eropah sekitar tahun 1900, dengan tehnik serta susunan tonil Melaju jang sudah ada dan jang mengambil pengaruh India dan Persia. Perpaduan keduanja itu disesuaikan oleh peranakan Eropah itu dengan publik umum di Indonesia zaman itu*” (Pané, 1953:8).
- <sup>11</sup> Nio Joe Lan (1941) suggests that pre-Independence films played an invaluable role not just in the popularization but also in the development the Malay (later Indonesian) language. Nio argues that through increasingly sophisticated film dialogues, the Malay language underwent linguistic transformations that eventually contributed to modern Indonesian vocabulary and grammatical structures (p. 19).
- <sup>12</sup> Original in Indonesia: “*Akhir ceritera didapat kesimpulan yang adil, bahwa tidak ada kesalahan antara kekolotan dan kemodernan.*”
- <sup>13</sup> As to be expected, these Eurasian faces continue to cause controversy among proponents of film nasional, who see their appearance as inappropriate. For one such opinion, see Depari (1990).
- <sup>14</sup> This is not unique to the Dutch East Indies case but has parallels in other parts of Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, Deocampo (2007) shows the influence of the colonial Spanish on the formation of Filipino popular culture. In Malaysia, peranakan Chinese also played an important role in popular keroncong music (see Tan 1989).
- <sup>15</sup> For more on the reappearance of ethnic Chinese films and filmmakers in post-Suharto Indonesian cinema, see Sen (2006) and Setijadi-Dunn (2009; 2009b). See also Khoo in this edition for a focused analysis on Edwin, a young Chinese Indonesian independent filmmaker.

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