

CHINESE TRADITIONAL CULTURE IN INDONESIAN FILM – *THE PHOTOGRAPH* (2007)

Teo, M. L.¹

¹Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

ABSTRACT

Under Suharto's New Order regime (1966-1998), there is virtually no sign of ethnic Chinese culture or Chinese character featured in Indonesian film. However, after the outbreak of racial riot in 1998, between 2002 and 2007, there are a handful of Chinese-themed films produced and directed by Indonesian indigenous filmmakers. Most of their films are subsidized by foreign funding and appeared in national and international film circuit. Among the films, *The Photograph* (2007), directed by a female filmmaker, Nan Achnas presents an enormous amount of traditional Chinese culture. This paper evaluates the formation of diasporic Chinese identity through a close analysis of the cinematic and visual feature of the film. Incorporated with the filmmaker's experience, the discussion of the paper focuses on the representation of diasporic Chinese identity in the film text and that emblemized by the recurrent appearance of three photographs in the film. The paper argues Chinese-themed film like *The Photograph* not only recuperated Chinese Indonesian stories but also re-emphasized the cinematic portrayal of multi-ethnic society on Indonesian screen.

Keywords: Chinese Traditional Culture, Chinese Indonesian, Chinese-themed film

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been a long time since we last see images of ethnic Chinese traditional culture on Indonesian screen. Perhaps, the period between 1930s and 1950s when Chinese in Indonesia were the main players in the film industry, Chinese traditional culture thrived. After independent in 1949, the country's film industry is gradually taken over by local indigenous due to the upsurge of nationalism. Although ethnic Chinese remain vigorously participating in the film industry, Chinese-themed films are vanishing in the progressive manner. By 1966 when President Suharto comes to power (1966-1998), the authoritarian implemented the assimilation policy that eventually erases Chinese Indonesian culture identity (Hoon, 2006). Following the mandatory assimilation policy, Chinese culture identity has been forcefully submerged in the public sphere and there is no visible trace of Chinese involvement in neither the national film industry nor Chinese culture on Indonesian screen (Sen, 2006). Until the outbreak of racial riot in May 1998 that shove to the resignation of President Suharto soon after the riot. With the transformation of the political landscape in Indonesia and the revoking of Chinese Indonesian discrimination policy and restoration of ethnic Chinese cultural practice in the public domain, the first Chinese-themed films after the *reformasi* re-emerged in 2002.

Between 2002 and 2007, there are a handful of Chinese Indonesian theme based films were produced and directed by Indonesian indigenous filmmakers. Most of their films are subsidized by foreign funding and appeared in national and international film circuit. The first Chinese Indonesian film was released on the day of Indonesian Chinese New year celebration in 2002. The film, *Ca-bau-kan* (The Courtesan, directed by Nia Dinata,) is also

screened at the 2003 Palm Spring International Film Festival and won the Best New Promising Director and Best Artistic Director at the 2002 Asia Pacific Film Festival, Seoul, Korea. Following *Ca-bau-kan* (2002), a Chinese Indonesian biographical film on a young Indonesian Chinese political activist, *Gie* (dir, Riri Riza) is released in year 2005. Funded by Hubert Bals, the film is a co-production of an indigenous-owned film company – Miles Productions and a Chinese-Indonesian-owned production company – *Sinemart* Pictures. A multi-awards winner, *Gie* won eleven categories at the 2005 Indonesia Film Festival in Jakarta including Best Film, Best Director and Best Screenplay. Not more than three years later, Indonesian female filmmakers, Nan Achnas released a foreign funded Chinese-themed film that explores Chinese Indonesian diasporic identity. The film entitled *The Photograph* (2007) centers on an aging traditional Chinese Indonesian who are in search of a male heir for the family hereditary photo shop. With all three Chinese-themed films directed by indigenous filmmakers, it indicates that Chinese Indonesians are either untrained or technically and artistically incompetence after a long-term proscription in the film industry. For the trained indigenous filmmakers, the burgeoning themes unlock the pathway to the exploration of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia although they are not necessarily unfamiliar with ethnic minority culture due to the long existent of Chinese culture in the nation-state. Nevertheless some of the indigenous director, like Riri Riza is astonished by the contribution of ethnic Chinese Indonesian such as Soe Hoe Gie the character in his biopic *Gie* (2005) whereas Nia Dinata and Nan Achnas are continuously inspired by Chinese subject matters. Hence, it is significant to learn about the cinematic representation of diasporic Chinese cultural identity from the perspective of indigenous filmmakers where politics and culture are no longer an issue. Nonetheless, it would be an impossible task to discuss all three films in this paper therefore I focus on the discussion on the film *The Photograph* in the reading of Chinese traditional culture in Indonesian film.

2. METHODS

Departed from the opinion Chinese Indonesian is an example of Chinese diaspora, this paper evaluates the formation of diasporic Chinese identity through the methods of close analysis and interpretation of culture representations to learn about the cinematic and visual features of the film. The paper argues that the film explores the topic of Chinese diasporic identity through a focus on traditional Chinese cultural elements as practiced by the diasporic Chinese character at the center of the film. Such elements, which had barely been seen on Indonesian screens for the last three to four decades take an important step forward in reinserting Chinese identity into the Indonesian cultural imaginary. The elements include a meditation on the concept of home, diasporic memory, filial piety and the concept of kinship connection. Pamela Allen has examined the concept of Chinese diasporic identity that links to the Chinese in Indonesia in her analysis of contemporary literature from the Chinese in Indonesian (Allen, 2003). In the film *The Photograph*, these concepts of diasporic identity are emblemized by the recurrent appearance of three significant photographs with the image of the railway track, empty harbor and old camera. Written and directed by Nan Achnas, the story of the film is inspired by the director's experience growing up in the multi-ethnic countries like Singapore and Malaysia where most of her friends in school are ethnic Chinese (personal communication, September 3, 2013). Through the delicate use of film text and cinematic images by Nan Achnas, the film offers a way to negotiate diasporic culture across difference in the multi-racial society.

2. DISCUSSIONS

2.1 *Photographs as the Memories of Homeland and Affiliation of Diasporic Identity*

The story of *The Photograph* centers on an aging and somewhat troubled Indonesian Chinese photographer, Johan Tanujaya (Lim Kay Tong) who runs a photo portrait business in Samarang, a Chinese dominated area in central Java. He inherits the archaic photo studio from his forefathers. The opening shot of the film brings us into a sequence of Johan's antecedents' photographs on the wall in a slow tracking shot that gradually reveals Johan as the last descendent of the family lineage. In deteriorating health, Johan is desperate to look for a successor to the family photo studio, a pledge that he promised to the ancestor to carry on the family business. Johan lives alone in a Chinese community house and he is frequently seen performing mourning rituals at the railway track. As the story continues, it reveals the emotional distress that troubles this traditional Chinese man. Haunted by three mysterious old photographs (the photo of railway track, harbor and old camera) that he has placed under the altar where he performs his ritual prayer to his ancestors as a mean of respect, Johan is unable to move on and is entrapped by his own distressing memories.

Sita (Shanty Paredes) is a young indigenous woman who works as a singer at the local karaoke bar. To run away from the overbearing pimp, Suroso (Lukman Sardi) who exploits her for money, she convinces Johan to rent her the vacant attic room above his studio. The spirited lady is motivated by her five-year-old daughter who lives in the village. Nevertheless, always short of money she decides to work with Suroso again, which leads her to being gang raped by a group of men set up by Suroso. After the incident Sita quits her job and offers herself to do cleaning at Johan's photo studio. When Johan is eagerly looking for an apprentice for his portrait business, Sita enthusiastically assists him but she is dismissed because Johan insists on a male successor.

Alongside the bond that developed between Johan and Sita, the film is closely interwoven with three prominent photographs that are central to the plot of the dramatic tale. The three photographs represent the distinct memorable moments in his life. The photographs are: the railway track indicates the place where Johan lost his wife and son to a tragic train accident, the harbor signifies the place where he first arrived from mainland China whereas the photograph of the archaic camera represents a pledge by which he is bound by his ancestors to carry on the family business. The photographs meticulously create a series of homeland narratives that are tied to the central Chinese character's diasporic identity aside from manifesting Johan's diasporic experience and memories of his journey to Indonesia. Together with the photographs of his ancestors we learn about his ancestry root and the value of traditional culture practice that he adhered by offering prayers to the ancestor.

The photographs not only become the representation of his memories of the event or distinctive moment in the past but also allow him to negotiate his diasporic identity. The connection between photographs, especially the sense of lost that embodied in the railway track picture and memories in the film evokes the idea of Barthes notion of the *punctum* in *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1981). The notion suggests that an attachment of emotion is with the photograph and that this emotion is like punctures of the wound that represented by the irrevocably loss of a person or event in the photograph. As in Barthes words, 'A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises, is poignant to me)' (1981, p. 25). The photographs that Johan holds on therefore contain images that described by the term *punctum* with the emotional properties that continuously puncture and distress him. While the picture depicts the past occurrence that is related to him, in the present the images in the photograph became the stimulus how Johan constructs his life.

As much as the imageries attached to the photographs evoke memories of the past, they also recollect the memories of Johan's family – his deceased parents, ancestors, wife and son. Most importantly for the culturally adhered diasporic character, the photographs also recall the memories of his journey from home – China as well as other memories of homeland. The photographs of the ancestors that he had in his photo shop and the prayers that he offers frequently in the film are seen as a representation of an act piety and adherence of traditional Chinese culture value (Cohen & Van Hear, 2008). The photographs of ancestors is then became an emblem of his ethnic origin and culture root as the same time provide him with the memories and reminiscence of homeland. Gail Baylis writes, '... photograph [...] provides an important means of retaining links with the "home" country.' (2007, p. 21) in her article discusses about the relationship between photography as a medium in the construction of identity and cultural memory of Irish people. With the visual images in the photographs, the diasporic identity and cultural memory of Johan is able to negotiate through the process of both geographical and time distance (Baylis, 2007, p. 28).

In the film *The Photograph* Johan is shown as the second generation of diasporic migrant grew up in the archipelago when he arrived at the harbor at a young age (narrated by Johan when he revisited the harbor accompanied by Sita) perhaps with his parents, hence it is assumed that the pictures of his ancestors are brought by him or his parents when he left home. For Johan, the pictures conceive homeland memories due to his contiguous affiliation with ancestral homeland. Therefore the memory of homeland after he left home is reliant on the picture he brought with him. Although Johan may possibly be continued to maintain the myth of homeland return but he did not go home even though he is able to. To explain Johan's imagined homeland return and the harbor for no return, it is beneficial to refer to Safran's sight on Southeast Asian Chinese homeland myth, he writes

... homeland myth [...] has been attenuated in several locations, but for opposite reason: where legal and political disabilities has been removed and economic opportunities have expanded, so that the knowledge of the Chinese language and the connection with Chinese culture have become weak [...] and where the Chinese community has become so dominant that it has been able to secure an institutionally guaranteed status for its culture – in effect, to recreate a Chinese community outside the original homeland (Safran, 1991, p. 89)

Indonesian Chinese migration that occurred in a few waves generated different cultural flows that formed different patterns of cultural hybridity in the archipelago. In *The Photograph*, Johan's diasporic experience and culture adaptation exemplified a typical pattern that visualized by the director Nan Achans. As an ethnic Chinese maintaining apparent diasporic identity, Johan, is on the one hand seen preserving a strong value of Chineseness, on the other he is seen speaking fluent Indonesian language, adopting indigenous name, living in the mixed indigenous and non-indigenous neighborhood in the city of Semarang. The cultural identity as represented by Johan is seen constantly undergone transformation and such process of change is increasingly fragmented and fractured as Halls writes, '...identities are never unified and [...] [but] increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Thus, in order to mediate the fragmentation and ongoing transformation as described by Halls, Johan tends to reliant on revisiting the memories of homeland through the photograph of his ancestors and continuing preserve the myth of homeland.

On the other hand the film also shows clear fabrication of diasporic culture especially that exhibited by the traditional Chinese Indonesian character. Cultural hybridity can take many forms. As Robert Young states, the concept of hybridity is rooted on the biological term that being defined as the offspring of human parents of different races (2005, p. 5). With the meaning of hybridity provided by Young, cultural hybridism then is referring to as the cross-cultural encounter that brought about by the meeting collision of two or more different cultures. It happens when a community pragmatically adopts the cultural signifiers of another community that are adapted to and interwoven with their own cultural practice. These cultural items signifiers can take the form of food, clothing, language and social practices. As for the diasporic character Johan, apart from the above mentioned evidence of his conformability to indigenous culture. One observable fact in the film *The Photograph* that grew out of the acceptance and tolerance of cultural hybridity is his openness to the local indigenous culture that allows him to accommodate Sita when she approaches him for a room to rent. Although Sita could not pay a full rent due to her unstable income, Johan leases the room out of his benevolence. The intermingling between them allows Johan to share his past memories of his family as represented by the three photographs as well as his recollection of homeland when they revisit the harbor where the diasporic subject first arrive in Indonesia. Through revisiting the harbor, retelling the stories of the past and imagining homeland Johan is able to achieve a closure for his fragmented and fractured diasporic identity. Furthermore, the tie between Johan and Sita aside from being the signifier of a cross-cultural interaction between two different cultures, it significantly represents the formation of Chinese diasporic culture in the archipelago. In the manifestation of Johan's diasporic experience and memories of his journey from home, the narrative of the film is thread by the three notable photographs that is briefly outlined in the discussion above. Each of the photographs conceived past memories and a narrative that interweaves Johan and his diasporic condition. A detail reading of the photographs is ensued in the subsequent section.

2.2 *The Harbor (Photograph 1): Memory and the Connection of Diasporic Chinese Identity*

One of the photographs that are crucial in the film is the photograph of the harbor that represents the memorable moment of Johan's first arrival from the motherland to Indonesia. The old and yellowish photograph represents the memory of homeland so as the root of his ethnic origin. This photograph is related to one of Johan's task that he long to achieve before he breathes his last breath beside the tasks that correspond to the other two photographs is, revisiting the harbor for a recall of the memorable moment when he first set his foot on the indigenous land. However, due to his poor health, the task has been unable to fulfill until the present of Sita who he then treated like a kin. The present of Sita not only allow Johan to revisit the harbor but the connection between the two allows the enigmatic solo to retell his memory of homeland by sharing it with a 'kin'. In the scene after the dream of his own death, Johan reveals the photographs to Sita. In front of the altar of burning incense, Sita promises her Chinese kinsfolk to assist him to fulfill his wish. Sita said, "Whatever you would like to do, let's do it." In a sorrowful voice, Johan replies 'It has been a long time since I've taken a ride on the train, a train ride then visit the harbor, to see the sea' while camera cut the photograph of the harbor that Johan is handling gently. Here, Sita is seen as playing the role of a catalyst connecting Johan and his past, of where he was and where he established himself now. The next scene opens with Johan and Sita on a moving train vivaciously heading to the harbor, when they arrived at the Johan approaches to the sea with a deep emotion. Sitting next to Sita, facing the sea where a vessel is visible in a distance passed by, he recalls his experience when first arrived at the harbor from China.

‘Kapal-kapal dari China ada di sini, saya ingat saya hampir jatuh waktu turun. Dari kecil saya ingin pergi jalan jauh. Balik ke Cina dari sini’

Translated as:

‘Vessels from China arrived here, I remember I almost fell off from the vessel when getting off. Since childhood I always want to travel far, back to China from here [sic]’

Sita who is learning the itineraries of Johan’s diasporic journey and the experience of his voyage optimistically expressed, ‘You can still do it, I can help you’. Sita’s words allow Johan to fantasize a home return. Although the myths of his homeland return is seen represented largely by the photographs in the film, the present of the indigenes Sita, an adopted kin is now becoming a part of his imagined return. For Johan who has lost his next of kin in an accident on the railway track, Sita is the replacement of his kin who he could count on to be a part of his imagined homeland return. Apart from that, for the dying old man, the revisiting to the harbor also enables him to achieve a sense of eternity through reciting the experience his diasporic journey and imagining homeland. In his trip return from the harbor, the film shows he celebrates a relief after visiting the harbor by sticking his head out of the window from the train with a joyful expression.

2.3 *The Railway Tracks (Photograph 2): The Loss of Kinship Connection*

The photograph of the railway tracks is connected to the incident in which Johan lost his wife and young son to a train accident when he was young. This is also one of the photographs that we see at the starts of the film where Johan put them up on the altar when he was offering praying to his ancestor. In the film, Johan is seen recurrently performing traditional religious rite with incense and fruit offering at a particular spot on the railway tracks where his family is killed. This is seen as a way of paying respect to the death as well as a sign of remorse especially for the person who is relevant to the accident. We learn later in the film that it is Johan who caused the death of his wife and son when he abandoned his family to be a travelling photographer in order to escape from the responsibility succeeding his father in the photo shop. The accident has also caused the family to lose a male heir of the photo shop business. It is for this reason that Johan lives in solitude and continually immersed in grief and sorrow. For diasporic Chinese communities in Southeast Asian, in this case Indonesia, the practice of kinship is of utmost concern. Maintaining kinship connections in the host country is equally important as to kinship link in the home country. This is because when diasporic subjects (mostly male migrants) leave home to travel to Indonesia or another destination in Southeast Asia, they often left behind their family, thus this philosophical and spiritual kinship link is essential to remain connected with their parents, wife, children and other relatives during their sojourn in the host country (Watson, 2004). In *The Photograph*, for diasporic subject who has lost kinship link both in the motherland and host country, the film offers an alternative by connecting him with a non-blood link kin.

As much as the photograph of the railway tracks signifies the loss of a family heir, it has been a distinct painful event that is overwhelming to the traditional Chinese man. To ease his grieve, apart from performing the religious rites at the railway track, in the film he insists to preserve the archaic camera equipment in his studio and operates the business by himself. When Sita is taken as the assistant in the photo studio, she is not permissible to operate the camera as Johan hold on to his oath of a male successor. However, the intervention of Sita in his life has again play an important role to facilitate his agonizing memory of the past and his life in the present. In the scene when his health is deteriorating she helps him to perform the

ritual at the railway track. The act represents her acceptance of the Chinese religious practice. It also suggests that she would be accepted as a kin in Johan's family, as only family member performs a rite like this for the deceased. Perhaps this is the message the liberal minded director, Nan Achnas aimed to convey to the general viewers in Indonesia. The bond between Sita and Johan gradually grows; eventually Johan shares his memory of the pricking moment that caused by the accident that took away the life of his wife and son. In recounting the stories of the past, Johan finally managed to achieve a closure for the puncturing moment of the past that preoccupied him for decades. Through this photograph, we see how a 'wounded' ethnic Chinese is eased by the indigenes Sita.

2.4 The old camera (Photograph 3): A Pledge to the Ancestors, Reimagining Heir

The photograph of the archaic camera represents Johan's family oath that is to continue the family-owned photo shop by a male heir. However, with the loss of Johan's son in the accident, the family oath is broken. In deep regrets, Johan has been leading a life of self-reproach. We have seen in the film that the photograph of the camera and all others photographs are stored in the vintage casing under the ancestor's altar – a sacred place for the deceased as according to the Chinese tradition custom and belief. Thus, it is believe that stowing the photographs beneath the altar is a gesture of requesting for amnesty from the deceased. With his health is failing, Johan decided to search for a male successor by putting up advertisement around the neighborhood. Through the help of Sita, they managed to interview several photographers but none of them meet the requirement of Johan. While he is unable to find a suitable male inheritor, Sita continues to assist him at the shop and his outdoor photography. In a scene, while the two are on the way to the outdoor photo shoot, Johan is seen clutching the signboard of the photo shop and Sita is hauling his old bicycle, while they are walking Johan unconsciously passes the signboard to her as he hauls the bicycle. Seeing business sign board as the emblem of 'living' in Chinese business, the act of transferring the signboard from Johan to Sita possibly implies the recognition of Sita as the successor to carry on the business of the family-owned business.

Nevertheless, Sita remains just an assistant in the shop. When the poorly ill Johan knew that he is dying, he finally requested Sita who were forbidden to operate his camera to take a photograph of him. In the archaic photo studio, he leaned weakly to his side and waiting for the photograph to be snapped. In the state of empathy Sita does as requested, unfortunately Johan pass away before the photo is snapped. She then decided to take another photograph of Johan with her standing beside him – resembling a family-like photo. The mutual acceptance of Sita and Johan, although it is unspoken, implies that it is the 'family' affiliation that ties the two human beings of different ethnic background to be family of each other. Although Johan insists on blood link or at least relative to inherit the studio in the beginning, later, when the relationship between him and Sita developed he gradually adapt and accept Sita. This transformation perhaps also suggests the metamorphosing of diasporic Chinese culture in Indonesia that after many generations in the archipelago the border of culture assimilation of the Chinese and local indigenes is almost unlimited.

4. CONCLUSION

The Photograph illuminates a rich texture of diasporic culture identity conserved by the Chinese in Indonesia as exemplified by the key character of the film. We see how diasporic Chinese identity of the character evolves and transforms within the cultural context. The integration of the diasporic cultural identity in Johan's daily life and the practice of traditional Chinese culture elements as witnessed in the film allow Chinese Indonesians to be

reconnected and closely affiliated with their culture of originality. From a critical perspective, although the re-emergence of cross-ethnic contents on Indonesian screen maybe representing a self-conscious ethnic tolerance as observed in the approach of the filmmaker, Nan Achnas, but the gap of interethnic class (Heryanto, 2008), is remain unnoticed. The resurgence of cross-cultural subject matters nonetheless has reinvigorated multi-ethnic cinematic images on Indonesian screen and unlocked the pathway to the exploration of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia film as evinced by the flourishing of Chinese-themed films in Indonesian cinema.

5. REFERENCES

- Achnas, N., Widjaja-Aftef, P., Harmayn, S (Producer), & Achnas, N. (Director). (2007). *The Photograph* [Motion Picture]. Indonesia: Triximages, Salto Films (Indonesia) & Les Petites Lumieres (France).
- Allen, P. (2003). Literature and the Media Contemporary Literature from the Chinese'Diaspora'in Indonesia. *Asian Ethnicity*, 4(3), 383-399.
- Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera Lucida : Reflections on Photography* (1st American ed.). New York: Hill and Wang.
- Baylis, G. (2007). Imagined Narratives: Photography and the Construction of Diasporic Cultural Memory. In A. N. Éigeartaigh, K. Howard, & D. Getty (Eds.), *Rethinking Diasporas: Hidden Narratives and Imagined Borders* (pp. 20-30). UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Cohen, R., & Van Hear, N. (2008). *Global diasporas: An introduction*: Routledge.
- Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who needs 'identity'? In S. Hall & P. Du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage.
- Heryanto, A. (2008). Citizenship and Indonesian ethnic Chinese in post-1998 films. *Popular culture in Indonesia: Fluid identities in post-authoritarian politics*, 70-93.
- Hoon, C.-Y. (2006). Assimilation, multiculturalism, hybridity: The dilemmas of the ethnic chinese in post-suharto Indonesia 1. *Asian Ethnicity*, 7(2), 149-166.
- Safran, W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return. *Diaspora: A journal of transnational studies*, 1(1), 83-99.
- Sen, K. (2006). 'Chinese' Indonesians in national cinema. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 171-184.
- Watson, J. L. (2004). Presidential Address: Virtual Kinship, Real Estate, and Diaspora Formation: The Man Lineage Revisited. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 63(4), 893-910.
- Young, R. J. C. (2005). *Colonial Sesire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*: Routledge.