

# Paper Boundary

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# HYBRIDITY IN ACTION AND CROSSING ETHNIC BOUNDARIES IN THE FILMS *NGENEST* AND *CEK TOKO SEBELAH*

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## ABSTRACT

*The recent revival of Indonesian cinema also marks the reappearance of Chinese Indonesians in Indonesian cinema. Ngenest and Cek Toko Sebelah are two successful films that were both written and directed by Ernest Prakasa, a Chinese Indonesian, and also featured Ernest Prakasa in a leading role. Drawing on the concept of hybridity, this paper observes and analyzes both films to find the manifested hybrid Chineseness related to inter-ethnic relationships. The results indicate that "race" still plays an important role in othering and building ethnic boundaries. Many stereotypes and counter stereotypes against both the Chinese and pribumi exist in the films. In terms of lessening ethnic boundaries, both films present hybridity in action in the form of inter-ethnic marriage, and the everyday relationships of the Chinese and other ethnic groups. Although the essentialized Chinese identities are present, they are constantly in negotiation with other identities, in forming a hybridized version of Chineseness.*

**Keywords:** Chinese Indonesians, hybridity, ethnic boundaries, Chineseness, films

## INTRODUCTION

During the course of Indonesia's history, there was a long absence of ethnic Chinese in the official corpus of Indonesian national literature and film industry, especially before the fall of New Order in 1998 (Heryanto, 1997; Sen, 2006). This curious absence gradually changed when Indonesia entered the Reform Era, as the ethnic Chinese regained the freedom to express their culture, which had previously been banned. Some films about Chinese Indonesians after 1998, *Ca-bau-kan* (2002) and *Gie* (2005), among others, have been critically analyzed (Heryanto, 2008). These films have been deemed only partially successful in challenging decades-old stereotyping of Chinese Indonesians, and presented an 'atypical' representation of a Chinese Indonesian (Heryanto, 2008, p. 89).

As Somers Heidhues (2017) suggested, we probably need new approaches in investigating Chinese Indonesian identity (Somers Heidhues, 2017, p. 611). In this regard, films can be useful to provide insights on the situational aspects of identity. Setijadi (2013) argues that recently, more films about Chinese Indonesians had shifted their focus from ethno-nationalist themes into more cosmopolitan ones. The three films examined by her are *Babi Buta Yang Ingin Terbang* (2009), *cin(T)a* (2009) and *CINtA* (2009). While this examination has shed light on contemporary lives of Chinese Indonesians, the three films studied are all indie films with limited audiences, hence presumably they have had less of an impact on how the public views ethnic Chinese. Until very recently, along with the optimistic growth of Indonesia's cinema

industry in the last several years, two strongly ethnic Chinese-themed movies, *Ngenest* (2015) and *Cek Toko Sebelah* (2016), were released. These two films not only tell the stories of Chinese Indonesians, but they are also written and directed by Ernest Prakasa, a Chinese Indonesian, and featured Ernest Prakasa in a leading role, and they both were successful in terms of box office. In 2015, *Ngenest* managed to assemble an audience of 785,786 during its circulation in the cinema, ranked sixth compared to other Indonesian films released that year ("Data penonton tahun 2015," n.d.). *Cek Toko Sebelah* has been more phenomenal, raking in 2,642,957 audience members, and ranking fourth in that year ("Data penonton tahun 2016," n.d.).

Interestingly, the uniquely strong Chinese-related theme and the Chineseness of the director, script writer, and actors in these films did not spark discussions in Indonesian media. This partly indicates that the development surrounding ethnic Chinese issues in Indonesia has been positive, as Indonesian society is more and more welcoming toward ethnic Chinese, including its language and culture. Racism overtones have partly subsided nowadays, although racial tension still exists. We can look back in 2014-2015 when Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or better known as Ahok, a man of Chinese descent, was appointed as governor of DKI Jakarta, which was a milestone for the Chinese in Indonesia. The opposition was quite clear, as there were threats that anti-Chinese violence similar to May 1998 would reoccur. Nonetheless, the subsequent events up until the imprisonment of Ahok were much more politically and religiously charged. Or we can go further back during the presidency campaign of 2014, when Joko Widodo was victim of black propaganda which accused him of being Chinese and communist. These cases suggest that whereas inter-ethnic tolerance is evolving, and religion instead of mere ethnicities has more and more become the source of conflicts, Indonesian society maintains negative stereotypes toward ethnic Chinese. These stereotypes about religions and ethnicities are also still threatening the inter-ethnic relationships in Indonesian young people (Parker et al., 2014, p. 485).

Hall (1992) expounds on the question of identity, how it is being "de-centered," following the fragmenting of cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nationality. Even if there is such a thing that is believed to be able to identify us, like "national culture," it is already shown that national culture is not as unified as many thought. He even went further to state that "modern nations are all cultural hybrids" (Hall, 1992, p. 297). Human subject are becoming fragmented and comprise several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved identities. Hybridity, as Hall (1992) has shown, may be formed when:

...people retain strong links with their places of origin and their traditions, but they are without the illusion of a return to the past. They are obliged to come to terms with the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely. They bear upon them the traces of the particular cultures, traditions, languages and histories by which they were shaped. The difference is that they are not and will never be *unified* in the old sense, because they are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and the same time to several "homes" (and to no one particular "home"). (Hall, 1992, p. 310)

This hybridity, using Hall's terms, is a "translation" (Hall, 1992, p. 310). The diaspora is a product of this translation. "They must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them" (Hall, 1992, p. 310). Goebel (2008) contributes further to validate hybrid identities by pointing out examples that appear to disembed language from ethnicity.

Chinese Indonesians, in this sense, can be particularly said to having a kind of hybridity. The younger Chinese generations, who are the products of New Order assimilationist policy, and the *Peranakan* Chinese, who had bonded with the locals, are not fully assimilated, even

though they don't speak Chinese anymore (Wolff, 1997). They still retain their sense of Chineseness, or, in other words, the boundaries between them and the "Others" are sustained and kept. Therefore, they already live with a kind of hybridity. The remaining question is how this hybridity can be sustained and applied as a smooth and balanced negotiation to release inter-ethnic tensions.

Meanwhile, stereotyping is closely related to essentialism, or, in this case, reification. Although Hall states that essentialist notion of ethnicity is "extremely damaging" because "it doesn't allow for hybridization" (Drew, 1998, p. 171), Werbner (2015) points out that there are two meanings of essentializing. Essentializing as an *objectification*, is "a rightful performance or representation of multiple, valorized and aestheticized identifications", while essentialist in its pernicious sense is *reification*, that is "representation which distorts and silences" (Werbner, 2015, p. 229). Thus, essentialism as a collective identity or objectification cannot simply be erased; it is a part of identity. The sense of Chineseness, referring to themselves as Chinese Indonesians, is a fact which concurs with this view.

Recent developments related to ethnic Chinese in Indonesia showed that further studies on Chinese Indonesians, especially in terms of challenging the stereotypes and essentialist notions of ethnicity, are still relevant. Hoon (2006) proposes hybridity as an approach to accommodate Chineseness in Indonesia, in terms of dissolving the boundary between "Chinese" and "*pribumi*," and in transforming Chinese ethnicity into a "creative, adapted, hybridized Chinese-Indonesian identity" (Hoon, 2011, p. 25). While stereotypes have strengthened the boundaries between ethnic groups, hybridity has the potential to counter stereotypes and cross boundaries. Even though hybridity is touted as a way to break free from inter-ethnic tensions, relevant studies regarding how to put hybridity into practice are still lacking. Because both *Ngenest* and *Cek Toko Sebelah* tell the story of relations between ethnic Chinese as well as with the non-Chinese, it is interesting to see whether these widely watched films do portray a concrete

image of hybridity in their representation of Chinese Indonesians.

Previous studies on these films investigate the moral values shown in the film (Hartanti, 2018; Nathania & Sukendro, 2017), and the cultural description the film depicts (Susanto, 2017). The study of Yulianto (2016) categorizes the receptions of *Ngenest* audiences on the discriminatory practices shown in the film, and Farady & Suryani (2016) assert that *Ngenest* has significant impact on social judgment of its audiences. There are still none that dissect the inter-ethnic relationships and hybridity portrayed in the film. Hence, this paper would like to investigate how *Ngenest* and *Cek Toko Sebelah* suggest and portray hybrid version of Chineseness, related to the interaction between ethnic Chinese and Indonesian natives.

## METHODS

This research analyzes the two films *Ngenest* and *Cek Toko Sebelah*. Close readings of both films are conducted to identify relevant and recurring themes related with our research questions. The theoretical frameworks of hybridity and essentialism/stereotyping are used to help us gain a deeper understanding of the essence of the films. The trilogy of books titled *Ngenest*, which were written by Ernest Prakasa, interviews and articles related to the films, and also commentary by Ernest Prakasa himself in his vlog are used as secondary source of data. These secondary sources are hoped to be enriching both films as our main text, and to shed light on the contexts of production and consumption of the films.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Through close readings of both films, themes about inter-ethnic social interactions become known, as well as significant points about hybridity related to identity construction. While *Ngenest* and *Cek Toko Sebelah* are distinct and story wise unrelated films, the following discussions to answer our research questions are not separated per films, but instead we will go back and forth between both

films, as there are intertextual relations between them.

### *Racial Looks for Othering Others*

*Ngenest* tells the story of Ernest (played by Ernest Prakasa), a Chinese Indonesian who was frequently bullied by his *pribumi* schoolmates during his childhood. Being part of a minority group in Indonesia, this bullying of the Chinese was prominent during Indonesia's New Order era (roughly from 1966 until 1998). But the history of scapegoating ethnic Chinese in Indonesia went as far back as the Dutch occupation era, before Indonesia gained independence. The division of ethnic groups into social classes was enacted by the Dutch colonial rule to create division among the Indonesian (then East Indies) society at that time. Special privilege was given to ethnic Chinese, who identified as second class to the Dutch and above the *pribumi* natives. This created tension between *pribumi* and the Chinese, and some racial riots already occurred before Indonesia as a nation was formed.

The worst state of Chinese Indonesians was suffered by them during Suharto's New Order reign, where all aspects of Chinese language and culture were banned, and the Chinese were forced to be assimilated into "Indonesian natives". In a way, this assimilationist policy is contradictory, because the Chinese were still stereotyped negatively, and clearly indicated that they were Chinese by the state, although they were forbidden from speaking Chinese and expressing Chinese culture openly (Chua, 2004). Hence, although the assimilationist policy was successful in erasing the capability of the Chinese to speak Chinese language, it had failed to erase the sense of Chinese identity.

It is presumed that *Ngenest* is set during this era at the earlier part of the film, where Ernest were bullied relentlessly. The film portrays the bullying in humorous and comical way. Patrick (played by Morgan Oey), another individual of Chinese descent, becomes Ernest's best friend and rescues him from the bullying schoolmates. How they avoided and escaped the bullies is told in funny ways. In reality, the bullying of the Chinese kids during this era

were more grim and scary (Anshori et al., 2018). The film does present a traumatizing consequence of the bullying. As Ernest concludes, in order to stop the chain of bullying of future generations of Chinese, he makes a radical decision, that is to marry an Indonesian native, so that his child will be "un-Chinese".

The discriminating and racist derogatory terms such as "Cina", "cong" were used against Ernest when he was bullied. The film shows that this bullying was done based on physical appearance, as people with slanted eyes and light skin tone were considered Chinese, and therefore should be bullied. But a scene shows that an obese non-Chinese kid was also bullied. Hence, physical appearance, which is considered not normal (different from common perception of normal), is of significant importance in projecting others as people who must be discriminated. On the other hand, another sequence shows an ethnic Chinese individual joins a group of bullying students (all are Indonesian natives) and tries to rob Ernest. This led Ernest to another conclusion, that bullying is mainly based on "difference". The ethnic Chinese who can adapt and blend in with the natives are accepted as part of the group. It is not exactly explained why this ethnic Chinese kid is accepted within the group and even join in the bullying of other Chinese, but it is enough to consider that similarity and difference play important roles in the process of "othering". Physical appearance is only an example of otherness or differences. In later sequence, Ernest actually tries to make friends with the group who frequently bully him, to eliminate the "difference" between them. One day he even joins in on the bullying of other Chinese, but this effort fails because the bullying "victim" recognizes him and knows his family, and because Ernest lacks experience in bullying. These similarities and differences become the signifiers of group identity. The failure of Ernest in becoming the part of his bullies' group, suggests that eliminating differences is useless.

Although already suggested by Hall (1992) that similarities of race is not scientifically grounded, the outward appearance of a person is still the main and common basis of othering.

Indeed, in the case of Chinese Indonesians who are not able to speak Chinese, their physicality is what is left to signify them as Chinese. In *Ngenest* and *Cek Toko Sebelah*, ethnic Chinese are portrayed as having slanted eyes and light-colored skin and require real Chinese descent actors to play them (in comparison with Nicholas Saputra who is not of Chinese descent to play Soe Hok Gie in *Gie*). On this ground, the image of ethnic Chinese in the films is similar with what we find in daily Indonesian's lives. The "different" physicality with the "Indonesian natives" is the base layer of identity on which inter-ethnic interactions occur.

It is clear that through both films, the boundaries between ethnic groups are drawn based on these racial appearance traits. The outward appearance is the main difference and is used in "othering" others. This is emphasized in particular in *Ngenest*, while *Cek Toko Sebelah* more so concerns crossing this border, which will be discussed later.

The marriage between Ernest and Meira highlights this "othering line" between Chinese and *pribumi*. In hoping to have children with "non-Chinese" looks, Ernest decides to marry a *pribumi*. And in the end, he gets what he wants, he meets a *pribumi* girl, Meira, they fall in love, and they get married. At this point, Ernest just realized that there is a possibility that their child will look like him instead of Meira. He hesitates to have children. Hence, then the conflict in the narration occurs mainly around this problem. In the end, Ernest manages to accept reality and indeed his newborn looks just like him. Here the film shows that the boundary between Chinese and *pribumi*, which is based on looks, cannot be erased. The films instead present the viewer with hybridity in action, to blur or to lessen this boundary. One example is already presented above, when an ethnic Chinese individual can be accepted into a bullying *pribumi* group, even though this does not always work, which highlights the "blurring" of the "unerasable" boundaries between the ethnic groups.

### *Inter-Ethnic Relations: Stereotypes and Counter Stereotypes*

Hall (1997, p. 258) posits that stereotypes reduce, essentialize, naturalize and fix differences. As shown above, the racial difference works as a basis for the boundary between ethnic Chinese and the *pribumi*. On top of this basis, stereotypes are at play to make these boundaries everlasting. While stereotypes are needed to preserve the social and symbolic order, in terms of blurring and crossing these boundary lines, stereotypes often need to be challenged and countered.

In both films, stereotypes and counter stereotypes are both present in both ethnic Chinese and the *pribumi*. In his book, titled *Ngenest*, which contains materials of his stand-up comedy performances, and also partly the story source of the film *Ngenest*, Ernest Prakasa states three false stereotypes commonly attributed to ethnic Chinese by the *pribumi*: (1) the Chinese are rich; (2) the Chinese are stingy; and (3) the Chinese are adept at cooking (Prakasa, 2013, pp. 4–7). Although presented in comical and humorous way, these stereotypes (except the third one) indeed often exist in Indonesian society (Hoon, 2011, pp. 127–132).

One prominent negative stereotype about ethnic Chinese is that they are exclusive, not willing to "blend in" with the natives (Hoon, 2011, p. 132). In both films, this stereotype is not present at all. In terms of language spoken, the way they dress, and how they interact with the natives are all presented very naturally. Again, both films present the Chinese as common members of society, with the difference being "racial" appearance. The Chinese in both films interact with the *pribumi* and have inter-ethnic relations without any sign of exclusivity or barriers. In *Cek Toko Sebelah*, Koh Afuk (played by Chew Kin Wah, a Malaysian actor) is a Chinese Indonesian who owns and manages a shop that sells daily necessities. His neighboring shop (hence his competition) is owned by Pak Nandar (played by Budi Dalton), an Indonesian native. The relationship between Koh Afuk and Pak



Nandar displays a stereotype and counter-stereotype images.

To analyze this relationship, we will first examine a scene below that shows the dialog between Amiauw (an employee of Koh Afuk, who is a distant relative of Koh Afuk. This is described by Prakasa himself in his vlog (Prakasa, 2017)) and Kuncoro (Koh Afuk's employee, an Indonesian native), after Pak Nandar confronts Kuncoro for flirting with Tini, an employee of Pak Nandar:

Amiauw : Please don't think about it.  
 Kuncoro : What is my fault?  
 Amiauw : Not you, he is just being sentimental against Koh Afuk.  
 Kuncoro : What exactly is the matter, *mamen* (Indonesian slang for "my man", meaning "my friend")?  
 Amiauw : A long time ago, there was only Pak Nandar's shop here. Koh Afuk's shop wasn't here.  
 Kuncoro : Why did he come here then?  
 Amiauw : During the 1998 riots, Koh Afuk's shop was looted by mobs. Everything was gone. So, he started all over again, in this place.



Figure 1 The dialog between Amiauw and Kuncoro

There are two key things to note here. First is the way the film portrays Kuncoro as he lays his hand on top of Amiauw's shoulder, and Amiauw seems content. This "brotherly" act indicates a close relationship between the two. Notice also how Amiauw tries to comfort Kuncoro by explaining the relation between Koh Afuk and Pak Nandar. Although both of

them are employees of Koh Afuk, Amiauw is a relative of Koh Afuk and holds a relatively superior position than Kuncoro. However, through this scene, we are presented with a challenge to the stereotype that the Chinese are always exclusive and reluctant to blend in with the *pribumi*. Second, their dialog shows a common stereotyping misconception, that is that ethnic Chinese are better merchants in comparison with the natives, they often regarded as "natural" in commercial business field.

A different version of the stereotypes that the Chinese are more capable in business is presented during the dialog between Yohan (Koh Afuk's eldest son) and his friends while they are playing cards:

Vincent : What's wrong with you? Why the gloomy face? Take it easy, winning or losing is not a big deal. Relax.  
 Yohan : My father wants to retire.  
 Vincent : That's good. It means you will get an inheritance.  
 Aloy : Wait a second. Please don't say the one who will inherit the shop is ...  
 Aming : Erwin, Han?  
 Vincent : Well, I don't agree with that. You are the oldest, you have more right.  
 (Aming and Aloy tell Vincent to shut up)  
 Vincent : It's true, isn't it? He is the oldest.  
 Aming : Let it go, Han. Just let Erwin handle the shop. What does he know about it? He will probably just mess it up.  
 Vincent : No matter what, even though you become poor Chinese without any shops, we will still be your friends.

Here Vincent's remark implies that the Chinese without a shop are stereotypically poor. It implicitly states that the Chinese are only capable in becoming merchants. If they do not become merchants, they will be poor. Of course, *Cek Toko Sebelah* is quick to counter this stereotype, as it is shown that both

Erwin (Koh Afuk's second son) and Yohan are capable in fields other than running shops.

Although the superiority of the Chinese in business implies that they should be disliked by *pribumi*, later it is shown that the relationship of Koh Afuk and Pak Nandar is going well. Koh Afuk is later forced to sell his shop due to his health condition and because his son Erwin (played by Ernest Prakasa) rejects to inherit the shop (he chooses to pursue his own dream of working overseas instead). The humorous dialog which occurs between Koh Afuk and his neighbor, Pak Nandar, after Koh Afuk decides to sell his shop indicates the friendship, a sense of respect and tolerance between these two persons of different ethnicities:

Pak Nandar : Koh Afuk, we are the ones left who still haven't sold our shops. If you do this, I will lose a friend. Besides, doesn't Koh Afuk feel sorry for those small stalls? Our customers, they must go very far to the Main Market.

Koh Afuk : I already signed the purchase contract.

Pak Nandar : Oh no.

Koh Afuk : Pak Nandar, I entrust my customers to you. Including Bu Wilda.

Pak Nandar : Oh no. Please drink, Koh Afuk, and have the cakes.

Koh Afuk : This is my house.

Pak Nandar : Oh no.

(Pak Nandar feeds a piece of cake to Koh Afuk's mouth.)

This dialog also presents a counter-stereotype of *pribumi*. The Indonesian natives are often stereotyped by the Chinese as lazy (Hoon, 2011, p. 148). But here the picture is different. Pak Nandar has the chance to dominate business when Koh Afuk sells his shop. But instead he is sympathetic toward Koh Afuk and does not show any sign of happiness. This implies that Pak Nandar does not just merely welcome his "upper-handedness" following the closure of Koh Afuk's shop, i.e., being lazy, but he is still willing to compete with

Koh Afuk, to open their shops for business together. Beyond this, we know that there actually exists a good relationship between the two different ethnicities, and also the two people who are supposed to be competing with each other.

Another counter-stereotype presented in the film *Ngenest* is when Meira's father stereotypes the Chinese as an "economic animal" who preys on the *pribumi*, because of his own experience being conned by the Chinese in the past.

Meira's father : Please listen. It is enough for myself to be disappointed by them. Don't let them disappoint you.

Meira : Dad, you cannot be like this. You cannot generalize. You were bankrupt because the Chinese cheated you, but this doesn't mean all Chinese are swindlers.

Meira's father : Aaah you know nothing.

....

Meira's mother : (pointing at the newspaper Meira's father currently reading) Dad, is this not your college friend, your senior?

Meira's father : Yes, arrested for corruption. Humiliating for the Sundanese.

Meira : Dad, doesn't it mean all of Sundanese are corruptors?

Meira's father : (retorts) Eeeh, you can't generalize it.

Meira : Yes, it's correct dad. It cannot be generalized. Just can't. Does it, Mom?

Meira's mother : (nodding in agreement)

This is a counter-stereotype directed that challenges the ethnic Chinese materialistic and corrupt image, by pointing out that other



ethnicities are also able to be corrupt and materialistic, not just the Chinese.

Additional counter-stereotype, or probably more accurately defined as a “balancing remark” on inter-ethnic tension, is presented in the dialog of Ernest and Patrick, when Ernest describes the father of his Chinese girlfriend (who recently broke up with him) to Patrick.

Ernest : Actually, his car (his girlfriend’s father’s car) just hit a motorbike. Her dad cursed his driver, you know. He said, *tiko, cibai!* (these are rude curse words toward the natives)

Patrick : Luxurious house, garbage mouth.

Here the racist derogatory terms were aimed at the *pribumi* by the Chinese. This reflects the reality, where in fact the racial insults did not only derive from the *pribumi* and were directed at the Chinese, but also vice versa. This is one dynamic of inter-ethnic relations accentuated in the film.

Related to ethnicities and nation, it is worthy to note that both *Ngenest* and *Cek Toko Sebelah* do not articulate any notions about Indonesia as a nation in general. Maybe it is just because the filmmakers assume that the Indonesian audiences will already be familiar with the historical context and settings of the films. Perhaps, these discourses about nationals are not as urgent anymore. The absence of this national identity offers a fresh outlook for the lives of Chinese Indonesians nowadays. As Setijadi (2013) pointed, it is time to relieve us of the ethno-nationalist framework which shadows the image of Chinese Indonesians in public media. In terms of developing peace in the nation, it may be ironically more useful to abandon the nationalist conception altogether, and to analyze the banal relationship between Chinese Indonesians and their *pribumi* counterparts instead.

In this regard, in terms of stereotyping, the ethnic Chinese are often regarded as un-nationalistic and disloyal to the Indonesian state. The missing discourse about the Indonesian nation and state in both films

suggests that these common stereotypes that understand ethnic Chinese as outsiders or people belonging to a foreign country are no longer relevant. Although these stereotypes are still prevalent in society (as shown by identity politics which sometimes target and question the loyalty of the Chinese to the state), these things are barely pertinent in daily lives of Indonesians. It should be highlighted that the omission of the articulation of national identity is in contrast with the multiethnic relations that both films portray. Both *Ngenest* and *Cek Toko Sebelah* present pretty diverse ethnicities, which can be noted from their dialects, for instance: Batak (Bu Hilda, a customer of Koh Afuk’s shop; and Ernest’s boss), Eastern Indonesian (Vincent, a friend of Yohan; Joni, a hotel room boy; an obstetricians in *Ngenest*), Madura (a shopkeeper in *Ngenest*), and also Betawi, Sundanese, varied Javanese, along with the Chinese Indonesians. Ernest Prakasa, author of both films, may have represented the values or ideals of contemporary Chinese Indonesians younger generations, that is to have multicultural, hybrid, and more cosmopolitan orientations. In reality, the younger Indonesian people indeed are practicing inter-ethnic socializing in their everyday lives (Parker et al., 2014, p. 484). It also does not necessarily mean that the Chinese are less nationalist, because in his book, Prakasa emphasizes that as an Indonesian citizen, his preference is to be more fluent in Indonesian language instead of Mandarin (Prakasa, 2015, p. 90). Furthermore, as Crul and Lelie (2019) conclude in their research, occupational characteristics determine the perception towards cultural diversity (Crul & Lelie, 2019, p. 204). Prakasa, who works in creative industry both as writer, director, and actor, fits the category of occupational characteristics that Crul and Lelie describe as perceiving cultural diversity as enriching.

Regarding notions of nation and history, it is interesting to analyze the scene when Ernest’s bullying friends finally apologize to him (when he graduated from junior high school, and after the sequence when Ernest tried to blend in with his friends by dressing as a punk and attending a punk concert with them). This apologizing scene, during his graduation, can

be symbolically interpreted as the turning point in Indonesia's history during the demise of the New Order and the beginning of the Reform Era at 1998. This also marked the turning point for Chinese Indonesians, who are able to express Chinese language and culture freely again. Blending in as a punk also signifies Ernest's efforts to socialize and to be accepted by his *pribumi* friends, which was rewarded with this reconciliation. The bullying in the film does not stop from here, though, as later a dialog at Chinese New Year celebration between Ernest and his relative clearly shows evidence of bullying. Ernest is also depicted as worried about his future children and decides to cut this bullying chain once and for all. This can also be symbolically interpreted that the tension between Chinese Indonesians and the *pribumi* are still present today, also as the worry of Chinese Indonesians that the anti-Chinese riots may happen again. The reconciliation between Ernest and his bullying friends is further emphasized when they all attend his wedding and congratulate him earnestly, like close friends. These scenes may also be interpreted symbolically as a prelude into more 'everyday' inter-ethnic relationships that normally happen in *Cek Toko Sebelah*.



Figure 2 Ernest's bullying friends apologize to him on his junior high school graduation



Figure 3 Ernest's bullying friends congratulate him on his marriage

### *Inter-Ethnic Marriage and Crossing Ethnic Boundaries*

Both *Ngenest* and *Cek Toko Sebelah* present inter-ethnic husband and wife couples who are Chinese Indonesian and *pribumi*: the Ernest-Meira couple in *Ngenest*, and Yohan-Ayu couple in *Cek Toko Sebelah*. Ernest and Meira are clearly inspired by Ernest Prakasa and his wife, Meira Anastasia. Meanwhile, Yohan and Ayu are also created by Prakasa as a dashing version of him and Meira in real life (Prakasa, 2017). Thus, both couples in the films are an expression of Prakasa's own inter-ethnic marriage.

Hoon (2011) describes that inter-ethnic romance "requires compromise on difference in race, class and religion—the three key markers of difference between Chinese and *pribumi*" (Hoon, 2011, p. 168). But in terms of hybridity, inter-ethnic marriage is indeed a site for development and articulation of hybrid identity and blurring of boundaries between ethnic groups (Kerckem, Putte, & Stevens, 2014; Luke & Luke, 1999). Hoon also suggests that religion is one of the biggest obstacles for intermarriage between non-Muslim Chinese and Muslim *pribumi* (Hoon, 2011, p. 170). A recent study by Jian (2017) also indicates that religion "may be an important factor affecting ethnic intermarriage" (Jian, 2017, p. 16). The study of Indonesian young people conducted by Parker et al. (2014) also concludes that most students disagree or disagree strongly with inter-religious marriage. Prakasa and his wife are both non-Muslim (Christians)

(Prakasa, 2015), as are Ernest and Meira in *Ngenest*. Prakasa himself admits that he is unwilling to have a complicated relationship due to different religions (Prakasa, 2015, p. 135). In the film *Ngenest*, Ernest also states the same reason, albeit in a more concrete form, which is his fear that his family will not give their blessing. Yohan and Ayu in *Cek Toko Sebelah* are also portrayed as non-Muslims. Although not explicitly stated, there is a scene when Yohan is playing cards with his friends, a picture with a bible verse quoted is seen hung on the wall, and they chat about how this picture conflicts with their gambling, and they all pray together afterwards in a Christian way. Ayu can be seen wearing a crucifix on a necklace, which indicates she is not a Muslim.

Family still serves as an important factor in deciding whether a marriage will be conducted. It is shown in both films, the negotiations and tensions between the family, and the corresponding person backgrounds the marriage. In *Ngenest*, Ernest's parents are shocked after hearing of his resolution to marry a *pribumi*; however, this reaction lasts a short time and there is no sign of disagreement portrayed later. A more elaborate description is of Meira's family, especially her father, which we already discuss above. Meira's father strongly disagrees at first at her becoming Ernest's girlfriend. However, in the end they get married and both families show their approval. A different reception is given by Koh Afuk for his son, Yohan, and his daughter-in-law, Ayu. The film indicates that Koh Afuk does not approve of their marriage, as it is felt by Yohan, partly because Yohan has a terrible past for not being a "good son" like Erwin. The film does not elaborate more, though, on why exactly Koh Afuk disapproves of this marriage. At the same time, this disapproval is also not explicitly shown, as the relationship between Yohan-Ayu and Koh Afuk seems normal from the outside. However, as the film resolves into conclusion, in the end Koh Afuk apologizes for his treatment toward Yohan and Ayu and they reconcile.

It is interesting to explore the wedding reception of Ernest and Meira portrayed in *Ngenest*. While Prakasa explains that in his

real life there were three wedding receptions held to accommodate the needs of both families with different traditions and the need of himself (Prakasa, 2015, pp. 152–153), in the film we are presented only with one reception, the Chinese style one. This Chinese style reception is admitted by Prakasa himself as the one he most loathes because of its complexities (Prakasa, 2015, p. 153). Comparing the reception as displayed in the film and the reality of it in the book, we get a blend of cultural signifying practices that negotiates between essentialized Chineseness and the cosmopolitan aspirations of the younger Chinese Indonesians.

As described by Prakasa in the book, his parents prefer to have a "Chinese" wedding. First he notes the venue of the reception, which is deemed very "Chinese" by him, as it is very commonly used by ethnic Chinese as a wedding reception venue (Prakasa, 2015, p. 153). In the film, however, there is no explanation of the venue, which does not exemplify a traditional "Chinese" venue. Prakasa in the book highlights the name of a *bihun* (vermicelli) factory written on a decoration flower board congratulating his wedding (Prakasa, 2015, pp. 163–164). Clearly inspired by this anecdote, in the film, he continues to comically laugh off the various text on the flower board congratulating his wedding, even adding a delivery phone number of a shop sending the board on one of them. This demonstrates the ability to laugh off the stereotypes about the Chinese as business-oriented merchants. The book also shows a different decoration of the wedding venue from the film. The decoration in real life, as described in the book, is more natural and not essentially "Chinese". However, in the film, we are presented with a red background and more "Chinese" elements in the decoration, as shown in Figure 3 above. The rituals conducted at a Chinese wedding ceremony (the *te pai*, as written in the book) are described in quite significant detail, with some pictures in the book, but these are missing from the film. Another interesting point is the use of Chinese songs during the reception. The film clearly displays the disapproval by Ernest of his parents' request of the master of ceremony performing Chinese



songs. Though, in the book, there is a similar description of this master of ceremony singing Chinese songs, in Ernest's disgust. Based on these observations, we can say that there are negotiations going on between the spirit of essentialized Chineseness and the more modern, universal cosmopolitan outlook of the Chinese youth. This in turn elaborately describes the heterogeneous nature of Chineseness, and also a hybridized version of an articulation of Chineseness, which takes the globalization and cosmopolitanism into account.

In terms of the relationship between husband and wife, both *Ngenest* and *Cek Toko Sebelah* present a harmonious picture of an inter-ethnic family. This is more obviously felt in *Cek Toko Sebelah*, where Ayu seems to play a more important role as a supporter for Yohan, calming him down every time he encounters conflicts. While in *Ngenest* the concern of the main story line is about the hesitation of Ernest in having a child, conflict occurs between him and Meira, as Meira is eager to have a child. However, this is resolved in the end. In this regard, ethnic boundaries seem to be dissolved in this inter-ethnic marriage, but it is not lost, since the negotiations between articulations of identity are still ongoing. Take for example how Yohan addresses Ayu "Mbak Yu", and Ayu addresses Yohan "Ko Han". Here the boundary clearly exists, as the way they address each other is ethnically bonded.

As a factor in the transformative process of Chinese ethnicity into a hybridized Chinese-Indonesian identity, "race" still plays an important role in determining others and shaping stereotypes. On the other hand, the dissolving of two "races" into a marriage will also play a crucial role in this ongoing negotiation between "races" and ethnicities in a new culture of Chinese Indonesians. The dynamics between the inter-ethnic couples in the film show this transformative process.

Quite different from *Ngenest*, the *Cek Toko Sebelah* film is not actually concerned with Chineseness in general. The theme of the story is more universal. It only uses the common phenomenon occurred in Indonesia due to the discriminative policy of New Order, that is the

tendency of the Chinese to become merchants. As the Reformed era progresses (although not explicitly stated in the film, but we can infer from the remark about 1998 by Amiauw above), more fields are open for the Chinese to embark on their careers. This can be seen from the choice of career of Erwin and Yohan, who are not to be merchants like their fathers.

Because of the nature of the non-Chinese-related theme presented, *Cek Toko Sebelah* instead can explore more freely the inter-ethnic relationships that may or may not reflect Indonesian society nowadays. Nevertheless, the hybridity is put to practice by the crossing of ethnic boundaries during these relationships. It is resonantly felt that the world in *Cek Toko Sebelah* is an ideal, utopic version of Indonesian society where inter-ethnic relationships prosper, in contrast with *Ngenest*, where inter-ethnic bullying often occurs, and the story focuses more on Ernest and Patrick relationship.



Figure 4 Interaction between Koh Afuk and Pak Haji

The "ideal" version of ethnic Chinese with hybridity in action in terms of crossing ethnic boundaries is manifested in the character of Koh Afuk. Aside from his mutual respect with Pak Nandar, his competitor, Koh Afuk builds many close inter-ethnic relationships. For example, he asks Pak Haji to go fishing together, he gives candies to *pribumi* kids, he lets his customer to pay later for goods, and he seems to have harmonious relationship with his employees. All of this is a huge counter-stereotype to the image of a stingy and exclusive Chinese individual. In fact, Koh Afuk very rarely displays his Chineseness or any aspects related to ethnicity, except for his name, which sounds Chinese, and his

occasional uses of Chinese language. This hybridized Chineseness preserves a distinct element of Chineseness (occasional use of Mandarin), but it mainly expresses a native-oriented outlook in everyday relationships with the Indonesian natives. This kind of hybrid identity makes the boundary crossing possible. Although this version of Chineseness seems like an utopic ideal, in reality it does exist, such as written in Anshori et al. (2018), where some *pribumi* describe these “ideal” Chinese which they met during their lifetime.

As we have witnessed lately that the ethnic tension surrounding the ethnic Chinese has progressively subsided, as opposed to the rise of inter-religion tension and the use of religion as identity politics in Indonesia, both films still shy away from touching these sensitive topics. The inter-ethnic marriage portrayed in both films is a clear indication, as they both present same religion marriages. While we identify hybrid ethnicities in the films, there are no signs of any discourse on religion, let alone the hybrid version of it. Hoon (2017) shows that the concept of “religious pluralism” has contested understandings, and proposes “religious multiculturalism” instead (Hoon, 2017, p. 15). Therefore more efforts are still needed to broaden the concept of multiculturalism into religion area. It seems it will be a great challenge to be open and exemplify inter-religion interactions through films in future Indonesian cinema.

Nevertheless, as both films similarly portray in their ending scenes, all the main characters with various ethnicities appear and interacts closely in a warm atmosphere. It seems then, these endings are the notion of an ideal state of Indonesia in terms of its rich ethnic groups present. Just as Wei et al., (2018) show in their study on the flourishing inter-ethnic dialogue and engagements portrayed in the ‘golden era’ of Malaysian film industry in 1950s and 1960s, we of course can also expect more Indonesian films similarly celebrating the multiethnic Indonesia in the future.



Figure 5 *Ngenest* ending scene



Figure 6 *Cek Toko Sebelah* ending scene

## CONCLUSION

Although Panggabean (2018) explains that inter-ethnic violence in Indonesia happens mainly because of the influence of state actors, he does highlight the importance of inter-ethnic interaction as an adhesive power between ethnicities. It creates social peace (Panggabean, 2018, p. 90). Hence, the healthy inter-ethnic relationships should be developed continually. This paper draws on the concept of hybridity as an approach to analyzing the films *Ngenest* and *Cek Toko Sebelah*, where both films show a hybrid version of Chinese identity which makes the ethnic boundaries to be crossed and less rigid. In the meantime, although stereotypes cannot be evaded and erased, the films also present some counter-stereotyping to promote a clearer understanding between ethnic groups. As the popularity of both films is confirmed in the positive reception of Indonesian public, this fresh outlook of Chinese Indonesians should have a useful influence in shaping the

perception of the public towards them. For future research, it will be useful to compare the Chinese themed films directed by Chinese Indonesians with the ones directed by Indonesian natives. The different perspectives gained will provide broader insights and deeper understandings on Chinese Indonesians life and identity, and the dynamics of their relations with Indonesian natives.

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