

FROM STREET SINGER TO POPULAR PREACHERS: Chinese Ethnicity, Identity and Representation in Indonesian New Media

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine the representation of Chinese Indonesians in New Media after the demise of Suharto's New Order regimes. It takes root in the recent phenomenon in Indonesia as the "reappearance" of Chinese faces in popular Indonesian media by discussing the celebrities or public figures, and ordinary 'man-on-the street' of Chinese Indonesians, who are catapulted in the mainstream mass media and portrayed in popular television formats in particular such as reality-shows, talk-shows, news and variety shows. Based on participatory observation and in-depth-interview to the producers of several popular TV shows casting Chinese figures, this article argues that the political changes from authoritarian Suharto's regimes which marginalized Chinese ethnicity to democracy has re-identified the representation of Chineseness in public sphere which contributes to more reception of Chinese identity at large in the country. This representation intermingles to produce the debates on religiosity and nationalism.

[Artikel ini bertujuan untuk meneliti bagaimana representasi warga Indonesia keturunan Tionghoa di media baru mempunyai kontribusi pada perspektif yang lebih luas tentang identitas etnis Tionghoa di Indonesia. Untuk mengumpulkan data utama, artikel ini menggunakan observasi partisipan dengan menghadiri produksi beberapa acara televisi yang diperankan oleh figur keturunan Tionghoa dan wawancara mendalam dengan mereka. Artikel ini

memanfaatkan video, dokumen, dan akun media sosial para figur itu sebagai data pendukungnya. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa perubahan politik dari rezim otoriter Suharto yang mendiskriminasi warga Indonesia keturunan Tionghoa ke iklim politik demokrasi telah kembali mengidentifikasi kehadiran ke-Tionghoa-an di ruang publik. Hal ini berkontribusi pada penerimaan warga Indonesia lainnya terhadap identitas Tionghoa secara luas di negeri ini. Representasi ini berkelindan dengan perdebatan keagamaan dan nasionalisme.]

Keywords: *Chineseness, Identity, Representation, New Media, Indonesia*

Introduction

As noted by several scholars, Chinese Indonesians were practically absent from the sphere of the media throughout the New Order regimes from 1966 to 1998.¹ Tight government control over Chinese involvement in fields of politics, the military and the media led to commerce as being the only major arena where Chinese Indonesians could and were encouraged to) maneuver and gain prominence.² With the democratization that swept in after Suharto's fall in 1998, the Chinese had more freedom and had been mainstreamed in Indonesian society. The resurgence is evident with many features circulated in the media to discuss about Chinese Indonesians figures. There have been also many biographies of Chinese Indonesians figures written in biography books some of which were filmed in the cinema. These features mostly discussed about the contributions of some Chinese Indonesians figures to the nation. There were features of Chinese Indonesians who actively participated in fighting for independence, both in the Dutch and the

¹ Ariel Heryanto, "Ethnic Identities and Erasure: Chinese Indonesians in Public Culture," in *Southeast Asian Identities; Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998).

² Krishna Sen, "Changing horizons of television in Indonesia," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 22, (1994), pp. 116-124. See also MG. Tan and A. Dahana, "The ethnic Chinese in Indonesia: Issues of identity", in *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1997).

Japanese colonizers. The spotlight was also on more current Chinese Indonesians individuals who have contributed to Indonesia's progress and development.³

Chinese Indonesians were framed by rulers to be the scapegoat for violence in Indonesia since the occupation of Dutch and Japanese colonizers⁴ until President Suharto's period.⁵ Suharto propagated Chinese Indonesian as the reason of economic and political problems for the benefit of his political ambitions.⁶ These frames led to prejudice and fear of the Chinese dominance especially in economic and political domains from Indonesian public in general. As a result, being Chinese in Indonesia was a marginal class in the society which forced Chinese Indonesians to focus on private sectors rather than public ones since there was a common understanding among Chinese Indonesians that they could not access public jobs like civil servant or other official position in the government.⁷

In the aftermath of *reformasi*, the successors of Suharto changed the tone of Chinese ethnicity and identity, especially after what happened to Chinese Indonesians during the riots before Suharto stepped down from office in 1998. They became the targets of violence due to the perception that suffers of economic crisis were caused by the dominance of Chinese conglomerates in the country. Chinese Indonesians' stores were burned, their houses were robbed, and several Chinese Indonesian

³ C. Setijadi-Dunn and Thomas Barker, "Imagining "Indonesia": Ethnic Chinese film Producers in Pre-independence Cinema," *Asian Cinema*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2010, pp. 25-47.

⁴ Donald E. Willmot, *The National Status of the Chinese in Indonesia 1900-1958* (Singapore: Equinox Publishing, 2009), p. 25.

⁵ Aimee Dawis, "Chine and the Cultural Identity of the Chinese in Indonesia" in Hoi Kai Leong (ed.), *Connecting and Distancing: Southeast Asian and China* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2009).

⁶ Sarah Turner and Pamela Allen, "Chinese Indonesians in a Rapidly Changing Nation: The Pressures of Ethnicity and Identity," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2007, pp. 112-127.

⁷ Frans H. Winarta, "No More Discrimination against the Chinese" in Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia* (ISEAS Publishing, 2008).

women were raped in that period.⁸ Not to mention, of course, several university students died during the riots.⁹ After *reformasi*, the government have changed the narration of being Chinese in Indonesia to avoid discrimination and exclusion from national identity. Thanks to the flourishing mass media companies which accelerated the process. For example, there were books published discussing Chinese Indonesian figures who contributed to Indonesian war for Independence during colonization¹⁰ and movies about Chinese Indonesian key figures contributing to the progress of Indonesian economy after *reformasi*.

With all the issues facing Chinese Indonesian before *reformasi* era, scholarly attention tends to discuss ethnicity and identity of Chinese Indonesian, yet lack of attention given to its representation in the media not only because limited media corporation available but also the government prevented it visible in public. This article attempts to fill the lacunae of scholarly attention regarding Chinese Indonesian's representation in the media by discussing three case studies of Chinese Indonesian figures in the media. It aims to examine celebrities or public figures, and ordinary 'man-on-the street' Chinese Indonesians who are catapulted in the mainstream mass media and portrayed in popular television formats in particular (reality-shows, talk-shows, news and variety shows). Featured in this article are Chinese Indonesians captured by media, who come from and are active in a variety of backgrounds and fields: business, entertainment, religious, politics, and humanism/activism. Instead of discussing about the contributions of the Chinese Indonesians figures, this article will investigate on how the representations of these

⁸ Charles A. Coppel, "Anti-Chinese Violence in Indonesia after Suharto" in Leo Suryadinata (ed.), *Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008).

⁹ S. Dian Andryanto, "Kronologi Tragedi Kerusuhan 12-15 Mei 1998, Gugur 4 Mahasiswa Trisakti" in <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1591350/kronologi-tragedi-kerusuhan-12-15-mei-1998-gugur-4-mahasiswa-trisakti>, accessed 14 December 2022.

¹⁰ Ravando, "Dr Oen Boen Ing: Patriot Doctor, Social Activist, and Doctor of the Poor," *Wacana*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2017, pp. 455-484.

Chinese Indonesians figures may contribute to a wider perspective of the identities of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia.

With the data collected from ethnographic fieldwork which consists of participatory observation and in-depth-interviews with key figures related to Chinese Indonesians, this article proposes that although some stereotypical portrayals persist, and through the representations of these Chinese Indonesians figures, audience are shown different portrayals of ethnic Chinese. Books, audio-visual materials, periodicals, and credible online sources are treated as supporting data of the study. The data collected are analyzed with content analysis strategies to sort categories of the findings.

The nuances of cultural identity related to Chinese Indonesians into several characteristics: (1) those who still practice Chinese traditions and some who do not, (2) the Chinese Indonesians figures discussed in this article are embracing their Chineseness by admitting it publicly and speaking proudly of their Chinese heritage, (3) there are some non-stereotypical ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, they are the Chinese who are willing to assimilate with the mainstream Indonesian society: the Chinese who are generous; Chinese who are not “anti-politics”, some are vocal in expressing their political stand, some even join the political arena and become elected officials.

To understand the reappearance of identity and representation of Chinese Indonesian in post-New Order era, this article discuss four cases of Chinese Indonesians ranging from a street singer to popular preacher with different figures. In the first case study, this article placed the spotlight on the singer, actress Alena Wu who started her career as a regular pop singer then specialized into singing mandarin songs. Her change of tune indeed has contributed to her overwhelming success. Alena represents the ‘faces’ of Chinese Indonesians who are open about their cultural identity. Furthermore, this article looked at Ernest Prakasa, a stand-up comedian, scriptwriter, film director, who would bring issues

about his Chinese identities or his experiences as a Chinese Indonesian living in Indonesia. Through laughter brought from stage, his acts say that the challenges in asserting cultural identity is no laughing matter. The next object is zoomed in at two ethnic Chinese “*humanis*” doctors who are popular for their kindness. Their works of mercy may be small and unheard of, but while they’re doing their service from the heart, it is hard not to notice their cultural lineage, highlighting that in the business of helping others, the Chinese Indonesian can lend a hand.

In the last two case studies, this article elucidates the story of Hary Tanoesoedibjo a media-conglomerate and a political party leader. He may have had a shady past and immense power and influence, yet is considered an icon in politics and in business. Finally, this article wrote about a Chinese and Muslim preacher, Felix Siaw. His life shows how faith and culture can mix and blend successfully.

From Street Singer to Popular Preacher

Si Penyanyi Lagu Mandarin: Alena Wu

Since the *reformasi*, around *Imlek* time, it is common for television channels to put the spotlight on Chinese cultural performances and to invite Chinese Indonesian celebrities to participate in TV shows. Alena Wu has been one of the Chinese Indonesian celebrities who is often invited to perform a number of songs, or guest in talk shows, or to be interviewed by infotainment news. Alena Wu started her career in the entertainment industry in 2000, in early *reformasi*, by joining and becoming the champion in a singing talent search competition, *Asia Bagus*, a show which promotes young new artists in Asia. The show was aired weekly throughout Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand.¹¹ In Indonesia, the show was broadcasted on *TVRI* since the show started

¹¹ Nissim Kadosh Otmazgin, “Contesting soft power: Japanese popular culture in East and Southeast Asia,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2008, pp. 91.

in 1992 until 1996, then continued by *RCTI* until the show ended in 2000.¹²

Since the show started, Alena Wu, whom at that time used her original name, Caroline Gunawan, was the fourth champion from Indonesia before her predecessors including Krisdayanti in 1992, Ida Satrianti in 1998, Rio Febrian in 1999. In 2003, using the stage name *Alena*, which also became the title of the album, Alena Wu released her first album under pop-genre. *Alena* comes from her nickname *Aline* which then became *Alena* which sounded more marketable according to her producer at that time.¹³ In the same year, Alena Wu became the host of *Oriental Nite* broadcasted on *ANTV*, an entertainment show with a strong Chinese music/nuance. Since her hosting career at *Oriental Nite*, Alena Wu started to be invited to sing Chinese popular songs on and off-air. As most of the audience were of Chinese background, Alena Wu admitted that in order to support her performance while hosting the show, she started to learn Mandarin intensively. In 2004, Alena Wu acted in a *telesinema special Imlek Xiao Qing* on *RCTI* partnered with Ferry Salim, who gained popularity for his role in *Ca Bao Kan*.

With hosting *Oriental Nite* and her role as *Xiao Qing*, Alena Wu's image as 'Chinese artist' grew in popularity. In 2008, Alena Wu released her second album titled *Seindah Diriku* (As Beautiful as Me). Similar to her first album, her second album was also consisted of Indonesian songs. Alena Wu's third album *Blessed (Xing Fu)* (Figure 1) was launched in 2016. Different from her first and second album which have Alena on the cover, the third album has Alena Wu on it. Although she has been using the name long before the launching of her third album, the name Alena Wu was officially used as her stage-name since then. The name *Wu* is the Mandarin of *Gouw* in Hakka which becomes *Gunawan* in Indonesian, which is actually her last name. The name-changing to a more Chinese-sounding one by combining their names with the Chinese surname like

¹² Koichi Iwabuchi, *Recentring Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 100.

¹³ Interview with Alena Wu, 2016.

what Alena Wu did were also done by some Chinese Indonesians public figures. Apparently, there seems a ‘formula’ used by these personalities, all for easy recall and assertion of identity. The Chinese surname is added after the original name. This usually done by personalities who just go by one name. Another practice is to replace their Indonesian last name with a Chinese surname. As celebrities wish to have a greater name recall, some prefer to shorten their name by putting the Chinese surname than any other last name. The most extreme is to change the original name to a new one (Table 1).

What Alena Wu did is to change their original name to ones which more ‘ear-catchy.’ Many times, they would find the ‘closest’ sound to their original names. Generally, celebrities or public figures who have taken this way joined the entertainment industry after the *reformasi* in early 2000. Moreover, many of them started their career which relate to ‘chineseness’, for instance, Fendy Chow started his career as one of the finalists of ‘*Wajah Oriental*’ (Oriental Face) of *Aneka Yess!* Magazine in 2003, or Jenny Chang who played her debut playing the role of a Chinese bride in film *Karma* in 2008.

Naming' the Chinese						
Original/ Popular Name	Shorten the Name		Adding Chinese Surname		Change the Original Name	
	Original Name	Popular Name	Original Name	Popular Name	Original Name	Popular Name
Jenny Chang	Jeans Chantals Shalvynne Chang	Shalvynne Chang	Sumi	Sumi Yang	Caroline Gunawan	Alena Wu
Junior Liem	Vicky Veranita Yudhasoka Shu	Vicky Shu	Fendy Heryanto	Fendy Chow	Veronika Felicia Kumala	Cici Panda
Lenna Tan	Edwin Handoyo Lau	Edwin Lau	Handi Morgan Winata	Morgan Oey	Muhammad Ibrahim	Baim Wong
Yeslin Wang	Zack Lee Juwono	Zack Lee			Dita Anggraini	Mey Chan
Ustadz Felix Siauw					Liem Hai Thai / Muhammad Ustman	Ustadz Koko Liem
					Tan Hok Liang	Ustadz Anton Medan

Table 1. Naming Strategies

Unlike the album *Alena* and *Seindah Diriku*, Blessed is full-Mandarin album which consists of ten songs, where nine of them are in Mandarin and one in English. During the launching of the album, Alena Wu said

that she has dreamed of producing an album consist of Mandarin songs. On her interview with *Jakarta Post*,¹⁴ she said her likened to Mandarin songs has been built since she was young since her grandmother often sings Mandarin songs and read her books about Chinese and its traditions.

In fact, since her second album, she had already planned to produce Mandarin songs but was hampered as the record label was reluctance, doubting their marketability in the Indonesian music market. But with the rising of digital marketing platforms, Alena Wu saw the opportunity of markets who could appreciate her idealism. According to Alena Wu, “in Facebook, in fact, there are millions who like listening to Mandarin songs”. Since then, she has been often called as ‘Chinese singer’, ‘Oriental singer’, ‘Mandarin singer’ or ‘Modern Pop Mandarin Singer’ as she put it on her personal website (alenamusic.com).



Figure 1. Alena Wu third album ‘Blessed’ cover

As her image as a ‘Chinese artist’ became stronger, Alena Wu’s appearances on media have become more limited. On yearly basis during *Imlek*, *Cap Go Meh*, or *Mooncake Festival*, on different TV channels, Alena Wu would perform and sing Mandarin songs or invited as guest

¹⁴ Hans David Tampubolon, “Alena Wu: Embraces the Digital Sphere in New Release” in <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/02/05/alena-wu-embraces-digital-sphere-new-release.html>, accessed in 20 March 2016.

on talk-shows or interviewed in infotainment-news about her activities, experiences, or preparations in celebrating the festivities. During a report on *Imlek* celebration, Alena Wu and her family members were portrayed to welcome the TV crew wearing a red *cionsam* and greeted in Chinese saying “*Xin Nian Kuai Le*” which means “Happy New Year” with two hands clapping in a fist. For a five-minute report, the audience were invited to see how Alena and family spent the *Imlek*.

In the feature, Alena Wu shared her family traditions which she considered unique. One was that on *Imlek* eve her family would have dinner together with her father’s staff members. And just like most Chinese Indonesians would do on *Imlek* or the first day of Chinese New Year, Alena Wu said that her parents would bring them to their extended family, like her parents’ cousins or nephews. On the ‘*ang pao*’ (red envelopes for prosperity), Alena Wu shared that her family and her husband’s family had different practices in giving *ang pao*. Alena Wu said giving *ang pao* was still practiced within her family, while in her husband, Popo Fauza’s family, they no longer practice the tradition. Alena Wu also showed the ritual she would do while greeting—‘hold in fist’ the two hands by saying ‘*Gong Xi Fa Cai*’—then she would be given the *ang pao*, but the *ang pao* giving only happened before she got married. Alena Wu also shared the food the family would prepare and explain the meaning of each food on the table.

In regular days outside the Chinese events, whenever Alena Wu’s appear on the media, there must be something relate to ‘Chineseness’. Like when she participated in films, in *Crazy Love* (2013) Alena Wu acted as a Mandarin teacher in high school also in *Silent Hero(es)* (2015), the first film in Mandarin. Another example was when she’s on an infotainment news, they covered stories about her collection of *cionsam* costumes or about how she works on (make-up) her chinky-eyes. There have also been several times when Alena Wu participated and became the representation of ethnic Chinese in singing for social campaigns in collaboration with

other popular singers. Her collaboration with Andre Hehanusa who represents East part of Indonesia and Anji as the representation of a Javanese in a song titled *Indonesia Tanpa Diskriminasi* (Indonesia without Discrimination) with lyrics to encourage the people of Indonesia to say no to discrimination. The song was written to commemorate the *Sumpah Pemuda* (The Youth Pledge) in October 2013:

“Dari Aceh sampai Papua, Indonesia beragam. Ayo hidup dalam harmoni, Indonesia untuk semua. Apa pun agamanya, ia Indonesia. Apa pun etnisnya, ia Indonesia. Berbangsa satu, bangsa tanpa diskriminasi. Berbahasa satu, bahasa tanpa diskriminasi. Bertanah air satu, Indonesia tanpa diskriminasi. Kita ikrarkan, Indonesia tanpa diskriminasi. Kekerasan segera akhiri, kebencian segera padamkan. Jangan merasa benar sendiri, Indonesia tuk semua”.

(From Aceh to Papua, Indonesia is diversified. Let's live in harmony, Indonesia for all. Whatever the religion is, he or she is Indonesian. Whatever the ethnicity is, he or she is Indonesian. One nation, nation without discrimination. One language, language without discrimination. One motherland, Indonesia without discrimination. Let's pledge, Indonesia without discrimination. Let's stop the violence, let's stop the hatred. Don't think you're outdo others, Indonesia for all).

When she is not performing on stage, Alena Wu is involved with her charity and non-profit organization which she named *Alena Sababat Anak* (Alena Friend of Children) or *ASA* or '*harapan*' which has meaning to 'hope' in Indonesian language. *ASA* provides free education for children. In *ASA*, Alena Wu and her team coordinate teachers who want to dedicate some of their time to teach the children voluntarily. Alena Wu has been running the foundation, which she self-finance, since 2009. Slowly but consistently until 2016, a total of about 150 children were supported. In the commemoration day of '*Hari Kartini*' (Kartini Day) in April 2016, her charity works was acknowledged by Liputan6.com as she was awarded as one of the '*Perempuan Hebat 2016*' (Great Women 2016) as an "Artist and Philanthropist" together with the other five women who came from different backgrounds. One is a scientist, another one is a pilot, a designer, and an athlete. When she was interviewed, Alena Wu

was actually surprised that her charity work, although it has been covered by the media, was acknowledged as an achievement among other great works done by other women.

Alena Wu represents the ‘faces’ of Chinese Indonesian who are open about their cultural identities. She even embraces her Chineseness while at the same time, taking advantage of this to boost her career in the entertainment industry.¹⁵

Ernest Prakasa “Si Cina Murtad”

The shape of TV entertainment shifted in 2010 when stand-up comedy got popular. Coming from the success of the format innovation of a talent-contest back in the early 2000s, *Kompas TV* launched *Stand Up Comedy Indonesia (SUCI)* in July 2011. Contests such as these are seen as a dreamer’s chance to fame. Ernest Prakasa reached for his star and joined the audition in the age of 29 years-old at that time. After being accepted into the competition’s top 13, Ernest had to choose one of two paths—either remain in his office job at a recording company or go on with the competition. He put aside his desk and took third place on the show.

Among twelve other contestants of *SUCI*, Ernest was the only contestant with Chinese descent background. On each of his stand-ups, he would bring issues about his Chinese identities or his experiences as a Chinese Indonesian, and this always invited laughter from the audiences. One of his strong bits¹⁶ is to tell stories or jokes on the ups and downs being Chinese, living in Indonesia, like how he did not like being addressed as “*Kob*” or “*Koko*”, the traditional term of address for a Chinese Indonesian man, preferring instead the Indonesian terms “*Mas*” or “*Bang*”. Or about his name, on how lucky he is to be named with a non-Chinese-sound-name, he said:¹⁷

¹⁵ Sarah Turner and Pamela Allen, “Chinese Indonesians in a rapidly changing nation...” pp. 112-127.

¹⁶ A section of a stand-up comedy shows or routine.

¹⁷ Ernest Prakasa, *Ngenest 3: Ngetawain Hidup a la Ernest* (Depok: Rakbuku, 2015).

"Karena banyak bergaul sama pribumi, bokap gue memutuskan bahwa sebaiknya gue nggak perlu dikasih nama Cina, biar lebih mudah berbaur. Untung banget kan? Punya nama "Ernest" aja gue udah abis di-bully, apalagi gue dikasih nama Siauw Bok atau Bun Seng?"

(As my father was quite fond of mingling with the natives, he decided that it would be better not to name his son with a Chinese name, so that later his son would blend in easily. How lucky I am for being named "Ernest"! I often got bullied. I cannot imagine how worse it would be if for instance my parents named me "Siauw Bok" or "Bun Seng")

Ernest also pokes fun on his ancestry. He had said some absurd things about Chinese habits or culture. Here he shares a joke on a Chinese wedding:

"Cina kalau urusan duit paling gak ada matinya. Apalagi kalau urusan kondangan. Gua paling sebel. Gua sebagai Cina gua mau banget kalau misalkan angpao dinomerin. Misalkan begitu ngisi buku tamu, urutan gua nomor 20. Nanti di angpao yang kita kasih di kasih nomor yang sama, nomor 20. Jadi kan ketahuan si Ernest kasih angpaonya berapa. Gua tanya ke nyokap gua kenapa harus begini. Kata nyokap gua biar nanti keluarga mereka bisa balas harus kasih berapa".

(When it comes to money, Chinese people is unbeatable. One thing that I hate the most, is going to a Chinese wedding. As a Chinese, I am so ashamed with the habit of numbering the *angpao* (gift of money put in an envelope, often a red envelope). For instance, when I fill-in the guest book, my name is on the twentieth on the list, so they will number my *angpao* with 20. With this, they will find out later, that Ernest gives this certain amount of money. I ask my mother about this practice; she says that they do this so that they know how much money they should give in return).

Ernest would tell jokes about how his chinky-eyes often got him in trouble. When he was in high school, he was often targeted by robbers in the bus on his way to school because he had chinky-eyes and the thieves think he is a rich kid. He shared that the robbers would immediately notice that he is Chinese and shout, "Hey you CINA!" His chinky-eyes and his fair skin, easily point to the fact that he is a Chinese. He would say, "There was no way I could say I am an Arab" by pointing at his eyes.

He had no way to escape but to surrender the money he had. He would say if this experience did not happen once but often. His experiences of being discriminated as a Chinese Indonesian were shared in his trilogy of *Ngenest! Kadang Hidup Perlu Ditertawakan* (Pathetic! Sometimes Life Must Be Laughed At) (Figure 2). *Ngenest! (1)* was released in 2013, *Ngenest! 2* was released in 2014, *Ngenest! 3* was released in 2015. Each of the comics have sold for more than 50.000 copies. “*Ngenest*” can be taken to be the short form of “*being Ernest*”, but also sounds like “*ngenes*” the diminutive of “*mengenaskan*” which means something awful or horrible.

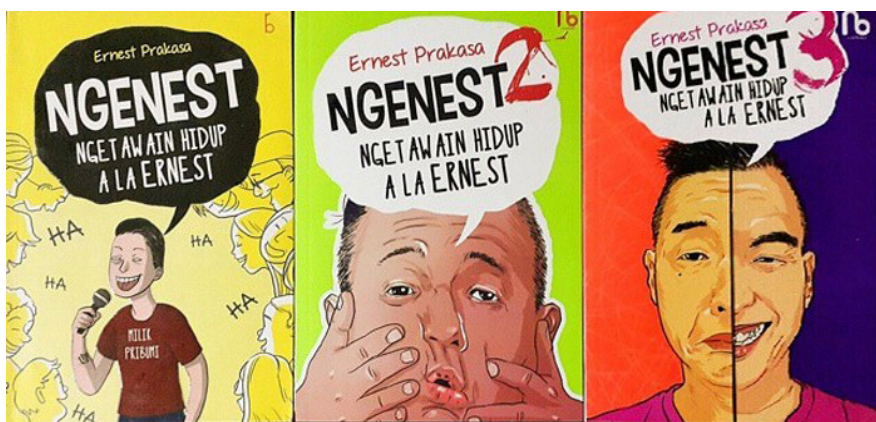


Figure 2. Trilogy of Ngenest!

In 2015, the comics was adapted in a film under the same title. In the movie, Ernest plays as himself where he shares his life story and rise to fame: from the bullying he was subjected to in primary school for his physical appearance, to his struggles growing up and trying to fit in. In the movie, Ernest is portrayed as being so preoccupied with the issue of his ethnicity that he obsesses about marrying a *pribumi* (indigenous). He is not keen on having children, simply because he does not want them to suffer like he did for being a member of a minority group. Before

Ngenest!, Ernest has been in several films as cameo or a supporting actor,¹⁸ but *Ngenest!* marks his directorial debut. In this film, Ernest also acts as the scriptwriter. The film was seen by more than 785,000 audiences and last for six weeks in cinema. It was included in the list of 10 most watched films in 2015.

In 2016, in his second attempt, Ernest returned with *Cek Toko Sebelah* (Check out the Shop Next Door). The title comes from the common phrase used by owners of small-scale grocery stores—which usually stand side-by-side on the same row of a street—should buyers try to haggle for a lower price, implying that their price is already the lowest compared to their competitors. Just like in *Ngenest!* *Cek Toko Sebelah* satirizes the stereotype of his Chinese Indonesian heritage and acculturation.

However, *Cek Toko Sebelah* is a fictional story that illustrates how among the Chinese family, there would be children who run the shop even though the children have degrees and have graduated from universities overseas. The film lasted for 65 days in cinema, almost twice longer than *Ngenest!* and was seen by more than 2.5 million audience and placed the film as the fourth film most watched in 2016 and the eighth film most watched ever. The film got many positive reviews, especially on the father-son relationships and the inter-racial love story between “*KoHan*” (*Koko Yohan*) and “*MbaYu*” (*Mba Ayu*).

When asked about the inspiration on writing about the couple, Ernest admitted that “*KoHan*” and “*Mba Yu*” borrows from his personal story. Ernest’s wife is a *pribumi*. Being open about him marrying a *pribumi*,

¹⁸ Ernest started his debut as cameo in *Make Money* film in 2013. In some of the films, he acts as cameo which only acts in one-two scenes: *Sundul Gan: The Story of Kaskus* (2016); *Koala Kumal* (Disheveled Koala) (2016). Some films put him as supporting character: *Kukejar Cinta ke Negeri Cina* (I’m Chasing Love unto China) (2014); *CJR The Movie* (2015); *Sabtu Bersama Bapak* (Saturdays with Dad) (2016); *Rudy Habibie* (2016), while some others earned him as one of the main characters where he is in character as himself, a stand-up comedian: *Comic 8* (2014); *Comic 8: Casino King Part 1* (2015); and *Comic 8: Casino King Part 2* (2016).



Figure 3. (above) Ernest Prakasa on his stand-ups broadcasted on Kompas TV wearing T-shirt 'MILIK PRIBUMI'; (below) Shop was painted 'MILIK PRIBUMI' to avoid being destructed in May 1998

Ernest in some of his performances would 'proudly' be seen wearing a statement t-shirt he designed written "MILIK PRIBUMI" (belong to the native) (Figure 3) and then explains why he is wearing the shirt despite his bit of marrying a *pribumi*. Because of this, his fans labeled him as "*Cina murtad*"¹⁹ as a joke. For many Chinese who were

¹⁹ *Murtad* or apostasy in Islam is commonly defined as the conscious abandonment of Islam by a Muslim in a word or through deed. It includes the act of converting to another religion, by a person who was born in a Muslim family or who had previously accepted Islam.

affected by the tragedy in May 1998, the statement “*MILIK PRIBUMI*” is actually traumatic as it reminds them of how the Chinese properties became the target by the rioters, and to avoid being the target, many would paint their properties with “*MILIK PRIBUMI*”.

In some of his stand-ups, Ernest often tackles current social-political issues in his shows. He also expresses his opinions on his blogs or his Twitter. He even got into ‘troubles’ several times for it, like he was terminated as a Host of *SUCI 4* in 2014 for criticizing a political party leader at that time on his Twitter account. Ernest got bullied after that. Realizing that he crossed the line, he asked for apologized for his comment.

In March 2017, Ernest had to face the fact that the company of the product which he acted as brand ambassador had to postpone the contract as the result of Ernest’s tweet on his Twitter questioning a meeting between Vice President of Indonesia Jusuf Kalla and ‘controversial’ Indian Muslim preacher Zakir Naik. He called the latter a financier for ISIS. Ernest’s tweet backfired after many people criticized him for his “baseless accusation”. Ernest then apologized and deleted the tweet. Among many criticisms referred to Ernest, there are still some people who show some support:

“...melalui Ernest, saya bisa memetik pelajaran bahwa berbicara di publik atas kebenaran nilai yang coba dipegang adalah tindakan yang harus dilakukan, tanpa memandang etnisitas dan agama sambil bersiap untuk terbuka mengakui kesalahan atas tindakannya yang gegabah. Lebih jauh, atas nama konstitusi dimana semua warga negara adalah sama, Ernest menunjukkan bahwa menjadi minoritas itu tidak hanya diam melainkan justru harus bersuara untuk menunjukkan keberpihakan dan sikap politiknya.”²⁰

(...through Ernest, I learnt that speaking the truth in public is an action should be done, without looking at ethnicity or religion, and open to admit one’s fault for a reckless behavior. Moreover, in the name of constitution where every citizen has equal rights, Ernest has shown that, as a minority, it is fine to speak up and to show interest and his political stand).

²⁰ Interview with Wahyudi Akmaliah, researcher of National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), 2017.

Ernest Prakasa represents the ‘faces’ of Chinese Indonesians who are brave to speak their mind and lend their voice to those who have been oppressed. He himself got bullied several times. Ernest also represents Chinese Indonesians who are willing to risk in alternative entertainment to make a change. This is seen in his craft in comedy and even in his personal life where he is married to a non-Chinese. He also quit his job to follow his passion, making people laugh.

“Si Raja Naga” Hary Tanoesoedibjo

Among the so-called Indonesian *konglomerat* (business tycoons), Hary Tanoesoedibjo or better known as Hary Tanoe stands out tall. He was listed as the 29th richest Indonesian in 2016.²¹ His business empires run in the field of media, finance services, energy and natural resources, and investments. But Hary Tanoe is more popular as the media tycoon in Indonesia who holds MNC Media Group.²² Like many other conglomerates, Hary Tanoe also comes from a lineage all too familiar with business: from his father to his two brothers, it’s all in the family. However, the Tanoe family have negative image as businessmen. The three Tanoe brothers have involved in legal cases, such as: corruption and business dispute matters. Unlike other conglomerates, Hary Tanoe ventured into another road.

In 2011, Hary Tanoe decided to dive into politics and joined *Partai Nasional Demokrat* (National Democrats Party). That was his first foray into politics until finally he formed his own party the *Partai Persatuan Indonesia* or *Perindo* (United Indonesia Party) in 2015 with mission, “*Wujudkan Indonesia yang berkembang, bersatu, adil, makmur, sejahtera, berdaulat, bermartabat, dan berbudaya*” (To create a nation (Indonesia)

²¹ Jane Ho and Naaznen Karmali, “Indonesia’s 50 Richest” in <https://www.forbes.com/lists/indonesia-billionaires/?sh=3a89916e2ff7>, accessed in 20 October 2017.

²² MNC Media Group is Indonesia’s largest media company which operates three Free-To-Air (FTA) televisions—RCTI, MNCTV and GlobalTV – as well as newspapers, magazines and websites. MNC also have other media-based businesses consist of radio, print media, talent management, and a production house.

that is progressive, unite, just, prosperous, sovereign, and dignified) (partaiperindo.com). At Perindo, Hary Tanoe acted as the Chairman. He openly admits that he aims to be a president someday, as he thinks he could solve the problems faced by the nation. To fix the country, Hary Tanoe says, “We need a leader with integrity, with capability and, most important, strong leadership.”²³

Since his involvement in politics, Hary Tanoe has been often portrayed, especially on the media he owned, to do charities. He would be portrayed to visit poor people and give donations. He also portrayed to visit *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school). He even formed a foundation called “*Yayasan Peduli Pesantren*” in December 2016 to help to build the infrastructure of the *pesantren* in many places in Indonesia. For these actions, known as a Christian, Hary Tanoe often got skeptic perceptions from some Muslim groups. Many considered his actions were only “*pencitraan*” (branding) for the sake of his political interests. Especially the forming was close to the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States.

Hary Tanoe was the only Indonesian, not even the President of Indonesia, who was invited to the inauguration of Donald Trump whom to most Muslim in Indonesia was considered as anti-Islam. Hary Tanoe has admitted that he is doing business with Trump’s children and it is pure business. Having many media outlets, Hary Tanoe often uses these in his campaign and to run the *Perindo* advertisements and report his campaign activities (Figure 1).

At times, the TV stations air programs about *Perindo*. These campaign activities caught the ire of the *Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia* or KPI (The Indonesian Broadcasting Commission) as it gave out warning in October 2016. In fact, this was not the first warning given by the KPI to the television stations belongs to MNC. This article noted, there have

²³ Financial Times, “Why Indonesian tycoon Hary Tanoesoedibjo is an admirer of Putin” in <https://www.ft.com/content/0323ccc0-6fe7-11e4-90af-00144feabdc0>, accessed in 20 May 2017.

been more than three times the television under *MNC* got warnings from the *KPI*, particularly related to his political activities: December 2013, January 2015, October 2016, and January 2017. Hary Tanoe also uses his media to showcase he being successful not only in business and politics but having a happy family through the wedding of his first daughter, Angela Herliani Tanoesoedibjo, to businessman Michael Dharmajaya in December 2012 also the 50th birthday of his wife, Liliana Tanoesoedibjo in March 2017.

The wedding of Angela Tanoesoedibjo was dubbed the “most extravagant” wedding of the year, the lavish ceremony was broadcasted on a one-hour program which featured the ostentatious preparation, the tea-ceremony (the Chinese ceremonial), holy ceremony, and the reception which was held in Bali. In both parties, among the guests beside relatives, there were celebrities, and businessmen. They even invited American musicians who flew in as the performer. At Angela Tanoesoedibjo’s wedding, there were: American music composer David Foster, ex-Pussycat Doll member-Nicole Scherzinger, American Idol champions David Cook and Ruben Studdard. Meanwhile, the birthday party of Liliana Tanoesoedibjo was entertained by ex-Westlife member-Shane Filan.

Although there are others Chinese Indonesians conglomerates who are wealthier than Hary Tanoe, but he often called as “*Raja Naga*”. This maybe because of his frequent appearances on the media which often become headlines. The word “*Naga*” (dragon) connotates the wealthy Chinese Indonesians conglomerates which has negative connotation as powerful people, greedy, “*pencuri uang rakyat*” (thieves from the poor), sly. This may be the impact of his ambitious activities in politics and his involvement with legal cases. Meanwhile “*Raja*” (king) connotates as to “the highest” or “the most”. So “*Raja Naga*” (the King of Dragon) maybe translated to as the most person need to be aware of.

Hary Tanoe represents the ‘faces’ of Chinese Indonesians who show concern over society’s challenges and offers solutions through business savvy and political power. He now represents Chinese Indonesians who are free to participate in any arena, which was previously restricted to people of mixed race. Hary Tanoe show that Chinese Indonesians can have political and business influence. Although his motivations in joining politics were not received positively by some, including stories of him using his business influence in politics, Hary Tanoe breaks stereotypes and offers the possibility that the Chinese Indonesians can greatly participate in an ever-changing society.²⁴



Figure 4. Hary Tanoe declared the Partai Perindo

Si “Tionghoa-Mualaf” Ustaz Felix Siauw

In respect of the phenomena of religious television programs in contemporary Indonesia, many preachers have become media celebrities. They are popularly known as “*ustaz seleb*” (celebrity Islamic preachers).²⁵

²⁴ Gerry van Klinken, “Ethnicity in Indonesia” in Colin Mackerras (ed.), *Ethnicity in Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 88-111.

²⁵ For more discussion about celeb preachers, see Wahyudi Akmaliah, “The Rise of Cool Ustaz: Preaching, Subcultures, and the Pemuda Hijrah Movement,” in Norshahril Saat and Ahmad Najib Burhani (eds.), *The New Santri: Challenges to Traditional*

One of them is the now famous *Ustadz* Felix Siauw. Just like other *ustaz seleb* which commonly hosts a *dakwah* (preach) program, *Ustadz* Felix Siauw also has a weekly TV program called *Inspirasi Iman* (Inspiration of Faith) which is broadcasted over TVRI where he has been a television host since 2012.

Like other *ustaz seleb*, Felix Siauw is having a good sense of humor, and has raised issues that young people can relate with. This is why perhaps why his audience has easily accepted *Ustadz* Felix Siauw. But his status as a *mualaf* (someone who has converted to Islam) seems to be a clear advantage, and adds to his credibility. Moreover, his cultural background as an ethnic Chinese and with his white skin and chinky-eyes which is also obvious from his appearance (Figure 1), makes him stand out



Figure 5. Ustadz Felix Siauw hosted “*Inspirasi Iman*” on TVRI

from the other *ustaz* and has brought him much more fame.

When he is invited to any talk show, he would always be introduced as the “*ustaz Tionghoa*” and he is always asked the usual questions: his journey in becoming a *mualaf*, and coming from a Chinese family: a rather odd combination for most

people. He would share his struggles of many years, until he was accepted as a Muslim by his parents. Later on, his parents stopped the threat of being disowned if he pursues becoming a Muslim. He was kicked out by his parents for staying firm with his decision to marry a non-Chinese Muslim woman.

Religious Authority in Indonesia (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2020), pp. 239-257.

Ustaz Felix Siau, popularly known as “ustaz *Tionghoa-mualaf*”, is also known for his “radical” ways. He preaches supports that Indonesia be a *khilafah* (an Islamic state) which is aligned with the vision of Hizbut Tahrir (HT), a radical Islam organization, of which he is a member. He is made more controversial because of his pro-*khilafah* stance, even among the Muslim community. Aside from preaching on his TV program, *ustaz* Felix Siau also actively delivers or tweets his preaching through his Twitter account @felixsiau which has of more than 2.6 million followers (per March 2017) since he first joined in 2013. He’s been on the headlines several times for his tweets about the teaching of Islam which to some people are irrelevant, exaggerated and debatable pieces of opinion. For example, Felix Siau has come under fire for his “anti-selfie” comments in a series of tweets he posted in 2015 (Figure 5). Netizens who disagreed with Felix Siau’s logic fought back by posting their own selfies. He is oftentimes mocked that he needs to learn and understand Islam better. Still, it can be said that Felix Siau is made popular by what to many is an odd mix of faith, culture and looks.



5. bila kita selfie, lalu merasa lebih keren, eksis, lebih baik dari orang lain | jatuhlah kita pada hal yang paling buruk yaitu TAKABBUR



Felix Siau @felixsiau 5h
4. bila kita selfie lalu upload di medsos, berharap -desperately- di-komen, di-like, di-view atau apakah | kita sudah masuk perang RIYA



Felix Siau @felixsiau 5h
3. bila kita selfie, mencari pose terbaik, memilih-memilah, lalu takjub dan kagum dengan diri kita | khawatir itu sudah termasuk UJUB

Julia: *From Street Singer to Popular Preachers*.....

“If we take a selfie and we feel cooler and better than others – we’ve fallen into the worst sin of all, ARROGANCE”. (Middle) “If we take a selfie and upload it on social media, desperately hoping for view, likes, comments or whatever – we’ve fallen into the OSTENTATIOUS trap”. (Below) “If we take a selfie, sift through and choose our best pose, and then we’re awed and impressed by ourselves - worryingly, that’s called PRIDE” (Ind.).

Felix Siauw represents the ‘faces’ of Chinese Indonesians who have been successful in assimilation in faith, and proving that it is beyond race. He breaks the stereotype that the Chinese are anti-Islam.²⁶

Ethnicity, Identity, and Representation: Chineseness Today

The political change after *reformasi* shifted the perception and reception of Indonesian public towards Chinese Indonesians. Discrimination against them decreases significantly and they appear as part of national identity where their important days like Imlek become national holidays and are celebrated across the archipelago. Mainstream media such national TVs as MetroTV, RCTI, and others do not hesitate to broadcast actors and actresses with Chinese backgrounds. Let alone the case of Ahok’s candidacy to become Jakarta’s governor because it was not merely about his Chinese background but mainly about religious issue of blasphemy²⁷ played by his opponents.²⁸ Ethnicity, especially concerning Chinese descendants Indonesia, after *reformasi* has transformed from the term which alienates them from national identity to that unites them as part of one which at the same time followed by recognition of Chinese Indonesians’ contribution to the country in the past and present.

²⁶ Hew Wai Weng, *Chinese Ways of being Muslim: Negotiating Ethnicity and Religiosity in Indonesia* (Amsterdam: NIAS Press, 2017).

²⁷ For more information about blasphemy law, see Syahril Siddik, “The Origin of Indonesian Blasphemy Law and Its Implication towards Religious Freedom in Indonesia,” *Tebuireng: Journal of Islamic Studies and Society*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2022, pp. 17-33.

²⁸ For more discussion about Ahok’s case, see Daniel Peterson, *Islam, Blasphemy, and Human Rights in Indonesia: The Trial of Ahok* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

It worth-noted that even though Alena Wu, the street singer, preserves her identity in her songs, her talent and contribution to the trend of Indonesian popular culture are appreciated by the public. It is even evident that her decision to firmly stay at Mandarin genre song does not exclude her from national audiences and even has got recognition from general public. It applies to Ernest as well. His controversies have nothing to do with his Chinese background. Instead, it is more about religious issues. Hary Tanoë represents the status quo as Chinese conglomerate with business success but also add to political figure. Felix SiauW represents the struggle facing Chinese converters to Islam to be accepted not only by Muslims as the majority in the country but also his own identity as Chinese.

To certain extent, these four cases presented in this article provide a clear explanation of the changing identity among Chinese Indonesians after the demise of Suharto in 1998. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, democratization process under the new regimes has provided the opportunity of equality among Indonesian citizens to have the same rights of justice and welfare. Second, the proliferation of media platforms such digital TVs and new media like social media and others accelerate the promotion of Chinese identity as part of national one.

Conclusion

This article show that Indonesian media including TV and social media in the Internet has mainstreamed the representations of the Chinese identity in post-Suharto Indonesian. The Chinese are no longer hiding or disguising their identities. In fact, they embrace their identities. Some celebrities are even taking advantage of their Chineseness. Like Felix SiauW, leads this example that despite a seeming marketing strategy, keeping his real name instead of using his Muslim name as a Muslim preacher, is working for him. Caroline Gunawan, who use stage name Alena Wu has decided to sing in Mandarin. It might be surprising to

some that these individuals express and are open about their religious belief. Alena Wu is a Christian as well as Ernest Prakasa, Hary Tanoe, and *Dokter* Lie. Felix Siauw is a Muslim. These personalities are indeed breaking the negative stereotype of the ethnic Chinese as ‘atheists’ as an impact of the popular notion of China and communism.

Even though their works continue to attempt to break the stereotype, some stereotypical images persist. In my analysis, I pose that through the representations of the Chinese Indonesians discussed in the article, showing Chineseness identifiers is only no longer taboo, but an accepted matter. Converting to Islam, or racial discrimination – two issues formerly considered sensitive are no longer taboo as well. There seems to be no rules on what can be discussed or what can’t be discussed, anymore. In fact, this seems to become the rule question on whether the Chinese ever felt being discriminated on the basis of their being Chinese Indonesians. Two films by Ernest Prakasa, *Ngenest* (2015) and *Cek Toko Sebelah* (2016) are included as the most watched film of the year (in fact, *Cek Toko Sebelah* is included as the top 5 most watched film ever). These are proof that the Chinese are more and more accepted in society. In the end, the popular representations through these individuals show that they are not different from anybody else despite their ethnicities: they show patriotism and love for country, they participate in nation-building—call for all, to do regardless of race or nationality.

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