4 Citizenship and Indonesian ethnic Chinese in post-1998 films

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Tan Peng Liang: 'The important thing is, when Indonesia gets its independence, and all of you occupy important positions in the government, never forget me. I want to live peacefully, no worrying, with my family'.

(Sylado 1999: 360)

In the mid-1990s, I examined the curious absence of ethnic Chinese in the official corpus of Indonesian national literature, and the absence of any mention of the social tensions that arise from the unsettling position of this ethnic minority (Heryanto 1997). By 'official corpus', I mean the 70-year-old literary tradition, officially recognized as the nation's literary heritage, produced and circulated among state officials and intelligentsia, and used in textbooks approved for use in schools. According to the official history, such literature began in the 1920s under the auspices of the colonial - subsequently nationalized - publishing house, Balai Pustaka.

The absence is striking in the face of several facts. Traditions of 'social engagement' and a heavy dose of didacticism have been strong elements in modern Indonesian literature. The issue has always been prominent in public consciousness following many decades of controversy over the legal, moral, and economic status of the ethnic Chinese minority. There was no restriction (official or otherwise) on dealing with sensitive themes in literary works; after all, Indonesian artists and writers have long enjoyed a privilege to break taboos, and gained credibility from doing so. The absence also sits awkwardly in the writing of various categories where the subject matter features prominently. These categories include non-fiction writings, as well as fiction that lies outside the category of official Indonesian literature. The latter is comprised of works that are 'disparaged' or deemed 'unworthy' (for example, 'pop' or 'entertainment' literature in recent times, and thousands of titles from the late nineteenth century disparaged as politically, linguistically, and aesthetically 'undesirable' by state officials and intellectual elites); works that were banned by colonial and post-colonial governments (best exemplified by the works of Indonesia's best-known fiction writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer); and works written in various ethnic languages.

Since 1998, we have seen a dramatic emergence of works that fill in this long-standing lacuna (see Cohen 2002; Samudera 2002; Allen 2003; Heryanto 2004a; Hoon 2004; Sen 2006). But we must quickly add that the formal ending of the New Order that year is neither the sole nor the most important cause of the change. The racialized violence against the ethnic Chinese in May 1998 (more to follow below) was a more important factor than President Suharto's resignation in triggering the trend. In what appears to be a response to the violence, a new recognition of Chinese Indonesians and their long history of civil predicaments has become one of the most popular features in contemporary literature, fine arts, and films.

It must be noted that instead of simply filling a gap in the old category of 'official literature', the aesthetic configuration since 1998 has transformed the overall categorization. Banned literature is now widely available and reprinted. The disparaged 'pop' literature that circulates in the cultural pages of newspapers and magazines has gained more prestige and authority, making the distinction between popular and 'official' literature difficult or meaningless. Established writers have also published in these pop media. Some of these works have been republished in anthologies, and well-respected critics are offering serious comments on them.

This chapter will assess the political significance of the new developments, analyzing the depictions of the ethnic minority in two films, Cak-baw-kun (2002) and Gie (2005), in the light of two main questions. First, what changes, if any, have taken place in the attitudes and views towards the ethnic minority as circulated in the public sphere, and particularly within this form of pop culture? More specifically, I am interested to see whether or not the long-standing and fatalist conception of ethnicity as something that comes with birth, being hereditarily 'in the blood' and following patrilineal line, (rather than a politically charged social construct) persists or is being challenged. Second, what changes, if any, can we find in the views and understanding of nationhood, and the position of this ethnic minority within it? I am interested to see if there is any stronger or weaker sense of nationhood as a modern, collective, and incomplete project of a plural society rather than a privileged heritage belonging naturally to sections of that society by virtue of being the natives or prabumi.

In an attempt to answer a similar question, Krishna Sen acknowledges some 'openness of current Indonesian culture and politics'. However, as she notes, while such openness provides 'the necessary condition for re-imagining the Chinese Indonesians, [it] does not ensure a radical shift in a politics of representation' (2006: 171). In her analysis, the dominant prejudice and racist biases persist in post-1998 Indonesian films. In the last section of her article, Sen looks closely at the portrayal of the Chinese Indonesian protagonist Tan Peng Liang in the film Cak-baw-kun, leading her to the conclusion that:

In post-Suharto Indonesia, if the son of a Chinese man can now be recuperated into Indonesian citizenship via the love for his indigenous...
mother and his son's indigenous mother, then it is still only a permanently second-class, politically muted, citizenship.

(Sen 2006: 182)

Sen correctly claims that 'no substantial research on the place of the ethnic Chinese minority in Indonesian cinema' has yet been published (Sen 2006: 171). Building on some of the significant findings and insight of Sen's inspiring article that surveys 'the presence, the erasure and the absent-presence of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese minority from the establishment of a film industry in Indonesia in the 1930s' (Sen 2006: 171), what follows focuses on the most recent films. Unlike Sen's article that examines what happened both on and behind the screen in the film production, my scope is much narrower, focusing largely on what appears on the screen against the background of Indonesia's rules pertaining to citizenship laws. In a sense, this chapter begins where Sen's article ends. I will re-examine both Sen's (2006) assessment of Ca-bau-kan and my own earlier views on the same film (Heryanto 2004a). I will also look at more recent films that came into circulation after Sen's manuscript went to press, primarily Gie (which she mentions in her final endnote, almost as a postscript). But before that, it is imperative that readers are informed of the broader socio-political environments where the new changes took place, and what the preceding situation was like, in order to appreciate the degree of the social changes that have taken place since 1998.

### After Authoritarianism

In May 1998, the world witnessed the formal demise of Indonesia’s New Order government, then the world’s most durable authoritarian regime outside the socialist bloc. Naturally, immediately before and after, there was a wide range of speculations and expectations of what changes would unfold in the world’s fourth-most populous nation, promising to be the world’s third-largest democracy.

Less than five years later, the process of democratization had lost its momentum. Although Indonesia will never be the same again, and some significant political change has taken place (see Heryanto and Hadiz 2005), the project of building civil society and democratization has broken down prematurely. Former politicians and cronies of the New Order have returned to dominate strategic positions. The economic recovery has been uncertain and frustratingly slow. While many loathe the thought of the return of the old discredited politicians, various polls and surveys suggest a rise of popular nostalgia for the New Order’s ‘good old days’ when the economy appeared more viable, and mass violence appeared much more limited in scope and intensity.

Such depressing accounts dominate the media both in Indonesia and abroad, making it difficult for many to recognize and appreciate transformations that have taken place in a few selected areas. The rise of Islamic politics is almost the only new development that has gained considerable attention, albeit one that is generally viewed with misgivings. Other changes, more relevant to our concerns here, but less frequently noted, include the liberalization of the mass media, the emergence of a new set of discourses of ethnicity and, most impressively, the revitalization of Indonesian art and cultures, including those genres that can be categorized as ‘popular cultures’.

Significantly, all this took place in the context of several other important developments. First, during this short but vibrant period, the number of women taking leading roles in literature and film production increased remarkably, although this does not necessarily mean a radical transformation of gender roles and politics (see Hatley 1997 for the case of literature; Sen 2005 and Sulistyanii 2006 for film). This happened at the same time as an increase in the prominence of sexuality and gender-related themes in recent pop culture (see Clark 2002). Second, there has been a noticeable decentralisation of Jakarta, the capital city, in the production of these new creative works, in the direction of both the local and global networks. Third, the domestic production and consumption of pop culture have increased in tandem with the markedly greater popularity of works from other Asian countries. Chinese, Indian, and South Korean films and television series have gained phenomenal respect, alongside Hong Kong movies, Taiwanese pop music, and Japanese comics and animation series (see also Chapters 3 and 5 in this book). I will return to these phenomena, paying special attention to contemporary films with some relevance to post-1998 ethnic politics. In order to do so, I will first provide a brief overview of the latter.

### Chinese Indonesians under the New Order

It is useful to begin with the question of what being ‘Chinese’ meant under the New Order (1966–98). Most writings on the subject emphasize the series of discriminations against this minority group. Although most observers have commented on their economic prominence, few have taken seriously the seemingly contradictory phenomena (political and cultural repression versus economic favouritism) as inseparable and mutually dependent. The New Order discrimination against this ethnic minority is best understood as a paradox (see Heryanto 1998 for details).

Ethnicity is largely, if not only, comprised of fiction. This is particularly true for the so-called ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. It is easy and convenient to forget its fictiveness in the flow of conversation, scholarly or otherwise (see Mandal 2003). Among this officially designated group, there are widely diverse social identities. Regardless of this diversity, citizens of this ethnic minority have not achieved, and will be unlikely to achieve, a status comparable to their counterparts in neighbouring countries. Chinese Indonesians do not enjoy the same social and cultural respect or legal protection as their counterparts in Thailand or the Philippines (Crouch 1985), where assimilation attained success to a significant extent, despite their rough edges in the past and a
potential threat of resurgence in the present (Hau 2003; Tejapira 2003). Neither do Chinese Indonesians enjoy such respect or protection as their counterparts in the consociational state of Malaysia (Tan 2001; Heryanto and Mandal 2003). The reason for this is, to quote the words of one analyst, the 'unbudging alienness' of the Indonesian minority group. This, in turn, is an 'ideological product of socio-historical processes specific to Indonesia, particularly in its construction of nationhood' (Aguilar 2001: 505).

The Chinese minority found access to state education and public service difficult. Entry to professions other than in trade and industry sectors was limited or impossible. Culturally, 'Chineseness' was declared foreign, while politically and morally it was undesirable to the officially constructed 'Indonesian Self'. Those labelled as 'of Chinese descent' were regularly subjected to discrimination. Until near the close of the twentieth century, the Chinese script occupied the same category as explosives, pornography, and narcotics in the customs declaration forms that all visitors had to complete when entering the country. Chinese names for persons, organizations, and businesses had to be 'Indonesianized'. Chinese language, mass media, and organizations were eliminated and prohibited.

So extensive was the war against Chineseness, such as in Central Java where I used to live, that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, popular Chinese physical exercises, Mandarin songs in karaoke entertainment centres, and the sale of certain Chinese cakes were prohibited (see also Suryadinata 1985; Indrakustuma 1993; Subianto 1993, TAPO 1993; McBeth and Hiebert 1996). In 1990, in cities of the Central Java province, no Mandarin song was allowed to be heard during the New Year's Eve celebration (Kedaulatan Rakjat 1990). All of this was done under the pretext that the New Order state was committed to assimilating the minority into the Indonesian body politic, by purging it of foreignness (i.e. Chineseness), and by fully assimilating it in pribumi (indigenous) culture and society. The 'assimilation' program was designed to fail.

The assimilation program had difficulty achieving its stated aims, firstly, because its coercive style of implementation provoked resentment, mostly in covert ways. In the capital city and among the better-connected members of the Chinese community, few individuals managed to defy the rules and pressures by retaining their Chinese names, or by engaging in activities deemed 'Chinese' (for instance speaking Mandarin or another Chinese dialect and observing some of their traditional rituals). But, secondly, and more importantly, the assimilation program was doomed to fail because success would have undermined the interest of its own sponsors. As I noted elsewhere, to dissolve Chinese identities in an effective program of assimilation means to give up the division of labour by race upon which the status quo depends (Heryanto 1998: 104).

Thus, just as this minority was humiliated and blamed (for bearing the marks of Chineseness), and discriminated against (for being 'un-Indonesian'), the New Order government was also active in manufacturing and nurturing the stigmatized Chineseness. No matter how much a Chinese Indonesian, especially male, went 'native', the state apparatus would ensure that traces of his past or his already assimilated Chineseness be brought back to the fore for further cycles of discrimination.

In many important legal documents such as birth or marriage certificates, there is a special code number for those citizens with Chinese ethnic background. This practice continues at the time of writing (Dharmasuputra 2007), 10 years after the New Order rule formally collapsed. Those who have dutifully complied with the official pressures to give up their Chinese names and adopted 'Indonesian' sounding alternatives still have to declare their old names when filling in forms. They have to present a certified document indicating their registered name change, thus distinguishing themselves from other citizens and rendering themselves subject to a series of extra requirements, both legal and illegal. Material issues aside, the moral and emotional effects of such systematic discrimination can be profound, as powerfully illustrated in the short story 'Panggil Aku: Pheng Hua' (Call Me: Pheng Hua) (Wardhana 2002). A Chinese man can marry an Indonesian pribumi woman and live like other pribumis, but they, their children, and potentially all their descendants will be labelled 'Chinese' by the state. In short, the stigma of Chineseness is hereditary and timeless.

The New Order-style assimilation was a paradox. Discrimination was practised not only against most members of the Chinese community in political and cultural affairs, but also for selected members of this ethnic group in the business sector. To prevent the possible emergence of a new independent bourgeoisie that might challenge the regime, the New Order political elite purposefully discriminated against many potential entrepreneurs among the pribumi. The state bureaucrats preferred to work with three groups: (a) members of the first family; (b) selected Chinese businessmen; and (c) foreign investors. In turn, this overt favouritism, nepotism, and collusion served to heighten existing anti-Chinese sentiments, as well as some measures of sustained xenophobia against the West. Rich Chinese business individuals were projected in public as the 'representatives' of the entire ethnic community. They were seen as those who most benefited materially from the status quo, through immoral and illegal means, at the expense of the majority pribumi.

Given the weight of the ethnic issue in critical areas of state administration, social interaction, and public consciousness, its absence in literary fiction and films over many decades is strange to say the least. For the same reasons, the fall of the New Order in 1998 prompts the question of what has happened in and outside Indonesian literature and films since then.

Return of the Dragon?

There is a strong tendency among observers to describe the 1998 resignation of President Suharto and the end of his New Order government as a big surprise, with Sen (2006: 172) being one of the rare exceptions.7 Likewise, there is
a tendency to overstate the extent to which ethnic politics has altered since then. While the excitement of post-1998 Indonesia reform (Reformasi) has quickly dissipated, observers of Chinese Indonesians have been generally impressed by the rapid resurgence and high profile of Chinese politics and culture in the public sphere. However, these changes had actually begun several years before Suharto resigned. And the significance of these developments is more ambiguous than has usually been recognized.

One example is the public celebration of the Chinese New Year, in which the dragon dance is a very visible part. As I have discussed elsewhere (see Heryanto 1998, 1999), contrary to the general view, the public celebration of the New Year and the dragon dance had in fact already reappeared by the early 1990s, well before 2000 when President Abdurahman Wahid officially lifted the ban, and before the then President Megawati Sukarnoputri declared in 2002 that from 2003 the Chinese New Year would be a national public holiday. In the mid-1990s, such a public celebration flew in the face of the formal restrictions that were still in force. In the early 1990s, when official restrictions on such celebration were reiterated with a new breath of anti-Chinese sentiments, they provoked public protest that had no precedent in the New Order’s history.

Most accounts of the Chinese in Indonesia emphasize this as a case of repression (rather than the paradox suggested earlier). Consequently, the general expectations after 1998 have been framed narrowly in terms of liberation, recognition, reinsertion, empowerment, and revival. The highly problematic conception of ethnicity itself, Chineseness in particular, has been left unquestioned. Admittedly, liberation, public recognition, celebration, and reconciliation of some sort have been in place for some time. But this is not the whole story, and these changes do not affect the diverse Chinese Indonesian communities. Indeed the questions of who is or is not ‘Chinese’-Indonesian, and of where, when, how, and why remain daunting and largely avoided. If the group’s boundary and identity are not clear, it is hard to speak of ‘liberation’. Whose liberation exactly is this?

Even those who self-identify as Chinese Indonesians (common among the older generation, and upper-class) cannot simply ‘go back’ to where they imagined they had once been (presumably in the early 1960s) before the New Order came to power. Things have changed so significantly and irreversibly since the 1960s that the current younger generation of Chinese Indonesians is both more Indonesianized and hybridized, a situation similar to, and connected with, that of their counterparts in other parts of Asia. When the New Order collapsed, mainland China was a different entity from what it was in the 1960s. It can no longer be as it was in the first half of the twentieth century, an important point of reference for members of an ostensibly ‘liberated’ minority. At the same time, Indonesia has changed in many profound ways too. Although anti-communism curtailed the New Order government, the formal political power of the zealously anti-communist and anti-Chinese elite at the dawn of the New Order rule in the mid-1960s has been profoundly eroded. An increasing number of the new generation of Indonesian pribumi elite show off pictures of their visits to Chinese tourist spots, something that would have been unthinkable in the previous two and a half decades.

Ethnic-based political parties and social associations sprang up among the Chinese community after Suharto’s resignation in 1998, something that has gained a great deal of attention from scholars and journalists alike (see Suryadinata 2001). None of these newly established parties and associations, however, has any significant political clout. Most have been short-lived, carrying only some symbolic and emotional values and expressing a long-repressed desire for public recognition and an emotional response to the 1998 racial violence. Neither these new parties and associations nor their attentive analysts have critically questioned what all of this contributes to the reconstruction of ethnic politics, and what ‘Chineseness’ means at this juncture. Their common interest is simply to boost the rights, recognition, and interests of a ‘group’ whose imagined identity remains nebulous and whose substantive elements remain fictional.

The increase in public use and study of Chinese language and characters has been phenomenal across the country. There are now five daily newspapers in the Chinese script. Some of the nationwide television networks and many private radio stations across the archipelago have regular programs in Mandarin (Samudera 2002). But in the great majority of cases, this practice is economically driven by instrumental rather than ideological or cultural motivations (see Hoon 2004). As noted earlier, Chinese New Year has been made a national public holiday. Its extended and elaborated celebration has been exuberant, attracting sympathizers from beyond the membership of the ethnic minority. But, as with Christmas celebrations in most industrialized societies, the commercial entertainment industry plays as great a role in this festivity — if not a greater one — as the pious believers in the ‘tradition’, religious or otherwise.

Despite what appears to be a dramatic transformation in the status of the ethnic minority over a fairly short period of time, some of the old problems persist, and new challenges have emerged. There has been no complete reversal of the status of this long-stigmatized ethnic group. Racial prejudice between the so-called Chinese Indonesians and their fellow nationals (especially in the western and central parts of the archipelago) is alive and kicking. In a very illuminating analysis, Indarwati Aminuddin (2002) discusses the racist overtones of many post-1998 journalistic reports in two major print media (the news weekly Tempo and its sister daily Koran Tempo). The two media companies command a high level of respect in the country for their commitment to professionalism. Even with Aminuddin’s minimal criteria for judgment (the popular conception of Chinese ethnicity is taken as given), the results of the study are very discouraging.

My analysis below of two recent and popular films that feature Chinese Indonesians as their protagonists, Ca-bau-kun (2002) and Gie (2005), confirms the observation of a broader phenomenon. This is not to overlook the fact that, by presenting a Chinese Indonesian protagonist, both films set themselves...
apart from many other Indonesian films. As their subjects are politically sensitive, both films could be considered bold and ‘risky’ from a business perspective. As semi-historical films, both films also deserve a special appreciation for the research and costs that have gone into their production. This is rather rare in Indonesia.

Both films are also unusual for another reason. Most of the people behind their production are not of Chinese descent. In an essay to welcome the staging of a famous production of the Chinese folkloric love-story Sampek Engtay by Teater Koma in Indonesia (2004), literary critic Faruk HT expressed both his deep sympathy for the Chinese minority and his regret that no artistic author of this group had yet presented works on the contemporary life of their ethnic fellow to enlighten what he alleged to be a poorly informed public. I suspect Faruk was eager to see the Indonesian counterparts of ‘hyphenated’ or so-called heritage Asian writers in several Western countries. He rightly suggested that television mostly presented this ethnic minority in caricature and stereotypes, presenting them as non-human, while Chinese Indonesian writers tended to make the self-effacing move of writing like other Indonesians. He accused them of completely neglecting sensitive subject matter, or dealing with it in a distant period or in settings far removed from the general public's sense of reality (Faruk 2004). With due sympathy, I find his appeal to Chinese Indonesian authors problematic. Inadvertently, perhaps, he suggests that one's ethnicity gives one privileged knowledge and understanding of the lives of all members of one's ethnic group. As Pamela Allen (2003: 69) rhetorically asks, I am not convinced that writers should be expected to be preoccupied with their own ethnicity, and write primarily about, and for, their own ethnic communities.

There has been due acknowledgment in public that Chinese Indonesians – like other ethnic groups – are heterogeneous, and that many are no less acculturated to local living traditions and/or global cultures. But such awareness does not take the next step and interrogate the dualism of the pribumi/non-pribumi divide, and hence the ‘artificiality’ of ethnicity. Very few have seriously considered the idea that ethnicity is a modern ‘fiction’, something external to one’s mode of being and everyday life. The metaphor of ‘Chinese blood’ – if sometimes impure – that runs through a Chinese ‘body’ still dangerously prevails. Even staunch critics of the New Order's racist policy and advocates of universalist civil rights for this ethnic minority tend to subscribe to and, by extension, reproduce the fiction, equating ethnicity with descent and seeing ‘Chinese’ and ‘indigenous’ in the final analysis as two distinct entities whose co-existence can be in harmony or conflict.

Ca-bau-kan (2002)

Ca-bau-kan is based on the novel of the same title. It tells a story of Tan Peng Liang and his mistress Tinung, a pribumi. Tan is a Chinese peranakan (aculturated Chinese in East Indies/Indonesia), the son of a rich Chinese businessman. His mother is the daughter of a Javanese aristocrat. Unlike most inter-racial love stories circulating in New Order Indonesia, Ca-bau-kan is rich in ethnographic and historical details (the accuracy of which is not the concern of this analysis). Dialogues in Chinese appear in many parts of the narrative, and alongside those in Dutch, variants of Malay, Japanese, and Arabic. The novel even presents handwritten notes by some of the characters in the story in Chinese and Dutch orthography, as if the story was real and the handwritten notes were authentic. To some extent, the portrayal of the protagonist defies the familiar stereotyping. He is at the same time familiarly human and ‘Indonesian’. Tan Peng Liang is presented to contemporary Indonesian audiences neither as an idealized hero nor as a despicable villain. More relevant to our concern is the fact that the novel challenges the official history of the nation during the New Order, which had been purged of the roles of the Chinese ethnic minority and the Left, and the complex relations between Chinese peranakan and pribumi.

The story was first published as a serial in the daily Republika, the first major and markedly Islamic daily newspaper in the nation since the New Order came to power in 1966 (see Chapter 1). It was later published as a novel, entitled Ca-bau-kan. In 2002, it was turned into a widescreen film with the same title but without the hyphens for the sake of simplicity, this slight distinction will be ignored in this chapter, making the story more accessible to a wider audience. A year later, copies of the film were further mass-produced for sale in video compact disc (VCD) format. Film critics had mixed reactions to the film, commonly noting that it did not live up to the expectations of those who had read the novel. But the painstaking efforts of the young, first-time film director Nia Dinata in depicting some colossal and daunting features of the movie are well commended. In October 2002, the film won two awards at the Asia-Pacific Film Festival in Seoul. In January 2003, it passed the first selection round for the US Oscar award for foreign films.

Earlier I cited Krishna Sen, who has pioneered the investigation into the absence of Chinese characters in Indonesian films. Sen’s view on Ca-bau-kan is entirely critical. She argues that the film continues the New Order’s racism by portraying the Chinese Indonesians entirely in a negative light, in complete contrast to the pribumi. As Sen sees it, in Ca-bau-kan:

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

In another peculiarly characteristic stereotyping common in New Order discourse, the Chinese protagonist is simultaneously a ruthless capitalist but also in dangerous liaisons with communists.

I see Ca-bau-kan as a sincere, albeit awkward and only partly successful attempt to defy the decades-long stereotyping of Chinese Indonesians. That it appears as a restrained or half-hearted deviation from decades of stereotyping is an index of the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of making a total break from the many decades of state-sponsored normalized racism. It is true that the world of Ca-bau-kan is not egalitarian and free of racism. Neither do we find an innocent and lovable ethnic Chinese protagonist. But given its historical context, Ca-bau-kan is a break from what preceded it in the last decades of Indonesia's film history for the following reasons.

Here for the first time in many decades we see the appearance of a Chinese Indonesian as a male protagonist on a wide screen, and who is narrated in such a way as to appeal to the sympathy of the viewers. Despite all his morally questionable characteristics and behaviour, Tan Peng Liang is presented with consistent sympathy as a near-hero, and viewers are expected to identify with him. To what extent this authorial intent is successful is a different issue.

Inter-racial love stories in many racial-conflict ridden societies tend to present the male protagonist from the same group as the producers and the primary target audience. The same applies to Indonesia. In the 1930s, when ethnic Chinese had a privileged position economically and enjoyed political liberty, the few inter-racial love stories that they produced featured Chinese men and pribumi women (see Sen 2006: 174–75). This was reversed when ethnic Chinese groups became political and a cultural pariah under the New Order as illustrated by the 1980 assimilation propaganda film Putri Giok (see Sen 2006: 177). Ca-bau-kan does not follow this pattern. Its male protagonist does not share a common ethnicity with the novelist, the film director, or the producer.

Of the few virtues that Tan Peng Liang demonstrates, one is indisputably of great significance for the sensibilities of the Indonesian viewers in general, namely the service he gave to the nationalist guerilla fighters who fought for Indonesian independence. More significantly and sympathetically, all he asks in return for his service is not special treatment in business dealings, but recognition as a legitimate part of the independent nation: 'If he important thing is, when Indonesia gets its independence, and all of you occupy important positions in the government, never forget me. I want to live peacefully, no worrying, with my family' (Sylado 1999: 360).

This statement can be read in more than one way. One review (Suyono and Chudort 2002) associated it with the intimate relationship between Suha­rto (an army officer during the 1940s who became the New Order president for six successive terms) and Lien Sioe Liong, his crony par excellence who has become one of Asia's richest tycoons since the 1990s. Others see it differently (more below). Anyone with a basic understanding of Indonesia's history before and after Independence and the roles of some Chinese Indonesians in that history would not miss the implied irony in this modest and innocent-sounding plea. Any such request by a member of an important social group who had helped change Indonesia into a modern and independent nation has been completely ignored and betrayed.

Unfortunately, the above 'politically correct' gesture on the part of the author is not further developed throughout the narrative. Far from radically subverting the New Order's racism, in Ca-bau-kan ethnicity is presented as something inherently and fatally biological. As if faithfully following the New Order's propaganda, Tan is only half-virtuous, thanks to his being half-pribumi. Most other ethnically Chinese characters are despicable, unlike most of the pribumi counterparts. I say 'most' because unlike Sen, who sees the dichotomy in entirety, I found minor exceptions in the contrasts. Among the ethnic Chinese characters, there is Njoo Tek Hong, a song and dance trainer (Sylado 1999: 14, 46–52), who appears very helpful to the disadvantaged like Tinung, despite his unpleasant manners. Among the pribumi, there are several 'bad' women characters at the beginning of the story who attack Tinung out of jealousy (Sylado 1999: 8–11), as well as the corrupt prison head who helps Tan Peng Liang escape easily (Sylado 1999: 216–18).

At one point, and via the voice of another pribumi character, Max Awyu, we can see another view of Tan Peng Liang's characterization that eludes any black-and-white caricature:

In silence, Max Awyu tried to comprehend Tan Peng Liang's true identity from his own perspective, and only later on would he understand that it was complex and impossible.... he was increasingly aware that the world where he stood was not just black-and-white. There were a lot more colours there. Worse still, these colours changed names, following the external forces that made these changes legitimate.

(Sylado 1999:361)

We do not know for sure if this view represents that of the author. The extent to which he is successful in projecting the persona of the protagonist is a separate issue.

Likewise, I find Tan Peng Liang's association with the arms trader and the communist insurgency during the Japanese occupation to be more
ambiguous than Sen suggests (Sen 2006: 181). Although such an association may invoke negative reaction from some sections of the Indonesian population, a closer look at the matter reveals a possible and significantly different implication. When asked if he has any problems dealing with communists or capitalists is irrelevant. Where there is some profit to be gained, I will make a deal” (Sylado 1999: 271).

Incidentally, this association with communism also signified anti-colonialism from the very beginning. Later it proved to be instrumental to Indonesian independence. This is well noted in a ceremonial speech by one of the leading pro-independence fighters, who has become a high official in the new government, Soetardjo Rahardjo, who is also Tan’s pribumi cousin:

Mr. Tan Peng Liang is a national asset. This man made a significant contribution to the armed forces during the struggle against colonialism. For that, before I say anything else, and on behalf of the nationalists, let me congratulate him and thank him.

(Sylado 1999: 381)

This is something that Suharto never hinted at in any of his public statements about any of his Chinese Indonesian cronies. In contrast to Sen’s arguments, these episodes provide a legitimate space not only to Tan Peng Liang, an ethnic Chinese, but also to the communists in the national history of the struggle for independence.

In a way, this helps us see how the narrative engages with questions of nationhood and the legitimate space for ethnic Chinese. As Sen eloquently states, summarizing the situation of post-1998 Chinese Indonesians, Tan Peng Liang has been ‘recaptured into Indonesian citizenship’ by association to his mother and mistress, but he remains a permanently second-class, politically muted citizen (Sen 2006: 182). In the vote of thanks cited above, Soetardjo Rahardjo acts as someone representing the nation’s true heirs (pribumi) who acknowledges the service of Tan Peng Liang, a helpful outsider. The latter can be an endearing ‘asset’ to the nation, but never a true and equal member of a collective and incomplete project of nation-building. This leads us to another critical point in our discussion, namely the conception of ethnicity: whether Ca-bau-kan affirms or subverts the dominant concept of ethnicity as something biological in the blood rather than a historically social construct.

The answer to this question has already been implied in the preceding paragraphs. A stronger articulation of an essentialist and biological understanding of ethnicity is found at the beginning of the story. The following is the voice of Tan Giok Lan or Mrs. G.P.A. Dijkhoff (daughter of Timung and Tan Peng Liang) in the 1990s, framing the whole narrative as a story of an adult in exile returning to her homeland in search of the identities of her parents:

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Like it or not, I am confronted by this question. It is not possible for me to erase my lineal descent. The fact is, my blood is partly Chinese and partly Indonesian. At the same time, I am a wife of a genuine Dutchman whose father occupied the Indonesian people.

(Sylado 1999: 2).

Note the curious contrast that Mrs. G.P.A. Dijkhoff makes of her father’s and mother’s identities: ‘Chinese’ versus ‘Indonesian’, instead of ‘Chinese’ versus one or more pribumi ethnicities. The latter is casually equated with the nation, while the former is a hyphenated compatriot at best, and an undesired alien at worst. One popular reference to Chinese Indonesians is ‘WNI keturunan’ (literally ‘citizen of Indonesia, of descent’). While the popular shorthand ‘WNI’ does not necessarily imply that only the Chinese minority are ‘citizens’ of Indonesia, critical observers have been quick to note that, in fact, this commonplace label may reveal a subconscious popular conception of their status as ‘sons and daughters of the soil’ or pribumi, for whom no formal evidence of citizenship is necessary (Aguilar 2001: 517, 519). Unlike the Chinese minority, the pribumis are believed to be naturally and automatically ‘Indonesian’ by birth or descent. Indonesians born and raised overseas until adulthood will all of a sudden become ‘sons or daughters of the soil’ when setting foot for the first time in Indonesia if their parents or any of their ancestors were pribumi.

This implies that ‘Indonesia’ is a kind of inherited property exclusively owned by pribumi. Generations of Chinese Indonesians born and raised in Indonesia should be grateful for being given the opportunity to be Indonesianized if the pribumi, as true heirs of Indonesia, decide to grant them such a favour. But this will require a series of rituals and procedure, and a considerable cost. Because this is such an unnatural undertaking it follows that, even with the best possible efforts, the outcome can never be authentic and full ‘Indonesianness’.

Of equal importance is the nationalist sentiment in Giok Lan’s statement, to which we must return in a moment. While it is easy to read Ca-bau-kan largely as a reproduction of the essentialist notion of ethnicity, the story contains contradictory elements, making it ambiguous if not awkward in this respect. In Ca-bau-kan there are two unrelated characters who have the same name (Tan Peng Liang), with misidentification playing a major part in the twists of the storyline. When introducing the second Tan Peng Liang, the narrator describes him as a resident of Jembatan Lima, owning a banana plantation in Sewan, Tangerang, where ‘Chinese people have become pribumi ever since their ancestors found this place in escape from the massacre of the Chinese by the Dutch in Jakarta in 1740’ (Sylado 1999: 17).

The status of pribumi and, by extension, ethnicity, is not understood as something fixed that comes with birth, but rather cultural upbringing and dispositions that can be acquired and adopted by outsiders. Chinese in Tangerang can be ‘naturalized’ not so much as ‘Indonesians’ by the immigration...
department of the state, but as 'prihumi' through generations of acculturation. Read in the 2000s, this is akin to the notion of 'assimilation' as prescribed by the New Order government. Unfortunately, this interesting non-essentialist and non-biologist perspective has neither resonance nor further development in the rest of the story. It is a tiny fleeting element that sparkles for a moment in the story then disappears with no trace, almost like something that came by accident or in error.

Nationalist sentiment permeates the 400-odd page novel and the two-hour long film. This is to be expected, as the story is set for the most part during the struggle for independence and the early years of the free nation. Less expected is a similar sentiment in Giok Lan's thinking as she speaks to contemporary Indonesians may sound more than a little nationalistic, especially when discussing the West or the Chinese minority. In this context, even the conservative insertion of the Chinese protagonist without serious vices (Tan Peng Liang is certainly more ambiguous than most others that appeared in Indonesian literary or cinematic narratives in the past few decades) appears bold and unusual — let alone the small suggestion cited earlier that some members of this ethnic group could possibly be assimilated as they 'escaped from the massacre of the Chinese by the Dutch in Jakarta in 1740' (Sylado 1999: 17).12

Gie (2005)

Nationalism also strongly sets the tone of the second film to be discussed, Gie (2005), whose fame originates mainly from two important sources. First, it was produced by and starred the nation's most celebrated figures of the day (director Riri Riza; producer Mira Lesmana; and Nicholas Saputra as the main actor). Second, it is based on the diary of Soe Hok Gie, a legendary student activist of the 1960s, of Chinese ethnic background, who died at the age of 27 while mountain climbing. Memories of Soe have been kept alive partly by the posthumous publication of his diary (Cattaran Harian Storong Demonstran, 1983), and partly by his elder brother's (Arief Budiman) engagement with student and NGO activism after Soe's death.

Like Ca-bau-kan, Gie deserves to be commended for its defiance of the nation's mainstream and remarkably conservative film production. Compared to Ca-bau-kan, Gie was definitely more difficult to produce, not only because it is based on a true story of a well-respected public figure, but also because many people who are part of the story were still alive and active when the film was released. Unfortunately, like Ca-bau-kan the film (and unlike Ca-bau-kan the novel), as a whole Gie is rather disappointing as a narrative and as an artistic work.

In contrast to the protagonist Tan Peng Liang in Ca-bau-kan, whose moral quality is either totally corrupt as Sen (2006) argues or ambiguously so as I noted above, the protagonist Soe Hok Gie in Gie is presented as a morally 'pure', intellectually superior, and politically ideal hero. Against the backdrop of Ca-bau-kan as discussed above, Soe Hok Gie is portrayed as being a model citizen. Such attributes were not invented by the film but were already widely circulated during the New Order. The fact that Soe is of Chinese ethnicity makes it doubly intriguing. He is paradoxically both 'not Indonesian enough' and problematically 'too Indonesian'. He is 'exceptionally Indogesian', excessively more so than other fellow nationalists in the story. In contrast to his racist environment (Riza 2005: 65, 107), Soe neither has a racist inclination nor is bothered by being a target for repeated racist hostility. Ironically, here is one major source of the problems with the film.13

First of all, Gie appears to have lost its momentum to appeal to Indonesian youth as the film-makers intended to do (indeed publicly stating this intention). As indicated earlier, by the time the film was made, many Indonesians had been demoralized, their activism marginalized, and the public disillusioned by the political reform movement of 1998. By producing Gie, and promoting the film the way they did, the film-makers appeared to try to revive a new optimism for Indonesian political reform — via a nostalgia for the romanticized activism in the 1960s. But this was done when the rest of the nation was either nostalgic for a return to the New Order rule or simply profoundly apathetic towards politics. It is hard to expect Indonesians in the first decade of the twenty-first century to be more attracted to the profile of Soe than to his 'ordinary' schoolmates. In contrast to the familiarly easy-going and youthful characters of the latter, the protagonist appears strikingly as an idiosyncratic loner, boringly studious, embarrassingly awkward in romantic relations, zealously nationalistic, and morally a purist.14

During the height of New Order repression, it was easy to romanticize student activism and fantasize an uncompromising figure like Soe. But in 2005 the following scenes appeared anachronistically absurd, if not laughable. In one scene, when reaching the top of a mountain, Gie exclaims: 'This is beloved Indonesia ... [Gie observes the scenery lovingly] You can't really say this with pride unless you see this for yourself and feel it ... That's why we climb mountains' (Riza 2005: 26). On another occasion, when Soe and his friends arrive at the summit of Mount Salak, they sing a patriotic song Negeri "Bagimu" (To you, the motherland) (Riza 2005: 91)."

Second, being portrayed as so 'ideally Indonesian', Soe Hok Gie appears very unfamiliar to most Indonesians. He is someone too far removed from what we find in everyday life in Indonesia. He is not someone ordinary Indonesians can easily meet, identify with or emulate. During the New Order, public discussion on Chinese Indonesians often referred to figures like Soe Hok Gie, not because he was well known (and thus a convenient referent), but because of his mythologized virtues. He is cited as an example of a 'good' Indonesian citizen, and a model for ordinary Chinese Indonesians to emulate. The problem is that he may not be a model that ordinary Indonesians of any ethnicity would be interested in or able to identify with.
Apart from the problem of an overdose of nationalism, *Gie* also suffers from two other major problems from a political perspective. First, with specific reference to Chinese ethnicity, the film does not depart significantly from New Order-speak and stereotyping, despite the exceptional sympathy for the Chinese Indonesian protagonist. Second, the film is also politically disappointing in its overall reference to the politically sensitive period of the mid-1960s. By and large it reaffirms the New Order's propaganda about its legitimacy at a time when such propaganda had been seriously discredited in public outside the cinema. Let me say more about each of these.

Being true to real-life and to the history depicted, *Gie* presents characters who are of Indonesian nationals from many different ethnic backgrounds. However, for curious reasons, in the published film-script the director and screenplay writer Riri Riza singles out those of Chinese ethnicity with reference to their ethnicity. Other characters are individuals, but not those labelled as ethnically Chinese. The following examples from the script are typical:

One man of Chinese descent greets him, he is TAN KOEN.
Two men of Chinese descent look at each other and smile a little.
A man, 50 years old, of Chinese descent, SURYA WINATA, sits at a dining table, reading a newspaper.
AT A NOODLE FOODSTALL. Two old men of Chinese descent read a newspaper intensely.

(Riza 2005:30, 47, 95, 144)

On screen, these people do not look distinctively ‘Chinese’, as they might have been intended to do by those who made the film. The whole issue of post-1998 cinematic representations of Chinese Indonesians (especially the attempts of those producing *Ca-bau-kan* and *Gie* to depart from stereotyping the ethnic minority in appearance) requires a special discussion that lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to note here that neither of the main protagonists in the two films discussed has the appearance of what Indonesians would commonly recognize as ‘typically’ Chinese Indonesians. More remarkably, Soe Hok Gie appears in *Gie* with a Eurasian face – the standard image of a male hero in Indonesian films, and in films from other former colonies of Europe. Nicholas Saputra, who played the role of Soe Hok Gie, has a German father.

For decades in the middle of the twentieth century, Indonesians debated whether Chinese Indonesians should purge themselves of their Chineseness in becoming Indonesians or maintain their specific cultural ethnic heritage on a par with other ethnic groups. The first has come to be known as the ‘assimilation’ position, propagated by the rightist sectors of the population, including the military. The second, called the ‘integration’ option, was supported by the more Left-leaning groups. The ascendency of the militarist regime of the New Order in 1966 put an end to the debate, making ‘assimilation’ the only legitimate mode of being Chinese Indonesian. But as noted earlier, this state-sanctioned program of assimilation is one that was designed to fail, otherwise it would have undermined the interests of its own sponsors. Presented retrospectively in the 2000s, when any association with New Order propaganda became necessarily suspect, the hero Soe Hok Gie appears in the film as a supporter of the military’s position (assimilationist) (Riza 2005:44). Actually, alliance with the military is not only the position of the protagonist Gie, but also the overall perspective of the film, especially with reference to the murky and bloody history of 1965–66.

*Gie* was released at a time when the Indonesian public was just beginning to demythologize the official history of 1965, rejecting the legitimacy of the militarist government of the New Order, rehabilitating citizens long stigmatized for being sympathetic to communism and Sukarno, and boldly demanding justice for the military abuse of power, even if often to no avail. Previous myths about Soe Hok Gie and the commercial promotion of *Gie* raised public expectations that this was a film about an uncompromising figure in political activism fighting against state repression. What we get in the film is almost the opposite. Almost identically with the spokespeople of the New Order regime, Gie is shown to be strongly anti-Sukarno and anti-communist, and pro-military. To one of his best friends, Herman, Gie confides: ‘To put it simply, I just want to have a change, so that life can be better … for that to happen, Sukarno must fall’ (Riza 2005:67). Gie joins the army-backed anti-communist rally and demands the banning of the then legal Communist Party (Riza 2005: 79, 92, 114).

Not only does Gie attempt to woo the sympathy of the film’s audience to be in alliance with the military. To a significant extent, his overall activities in the narrative in fact represent a particular style of student life that the New Order prescribed for Indonesian youths and students: to study hard, be nationalistic, stay clear of ‘dirty politics’, and be a moral voice of the people. Except for his inclination to irritate government officials with ‘moral’ reasons, in the published film-script the director and protagonist is shown to take part in the street rallies that were instrumental to the ascendance of the military to state power. He and his close friends’ main interests are elsewhere, however. ‘We’ll organize activities for the student union with programs that we like … mountain hikes, music, film screenings, … But occasionally we will criticize the government, obviously’ (Riza 2005: 60–61).

In contrast to the apolitical Gie, the film also features Gie’s friend from childhood, Tan Tjin Han, who joins the Indonesian Communist Party. We recall Sen’s apprehensiveness earlier with a scene in *Ca-bau-kan* where Tan Peng Liang makes a deal in illegal armaments with the anti-colonial communist guerrillas. Sen fears that this may have given unwarranted support to the New Order’s propaganda about the complicity of the People’s
Conclusions

Two brief conclusions can be drawn from this discussion. First, like Ca-bau-kan, Gie is in part a conscious attempt to deviate from and challenge the dominant conception of stereotyped ethnicities in Indonesia, and particularly the Chinese minority. But, at the same time, both films demonstrate how difficult it is for them to do what the film-makers may have intended. In both films, and to various degrees, ethnic stereotyping remains strong. The protagonists in the films, especially in Gie, are shown to be atypical Chinese Indonesians, but act in ways or for reasons that are not necessarily progressive or subversive to the dominant essentialist conception of ethnicity. In the case of Ca-bau-kan, the exceptional qualities of Tan Peng Liang are attributed to his pribumi mother and pribumi mistress. In Gie, the protagonist is doubly atypical: an 'atypical' Chinese ethnic, and 'atypically' Indonesian, making it difficult for him to be a model of identification for contemporary Indonesian youths.

Second, with regard to Indonesian nationhood and the status of the Chinese ethnic community, Gie is much more progressive than Ca-bau-kan. Unlike the latter, Gie exposes the more accommodating aspects of the project of nation-building, indiscriminate in regard to the citizen's ethnic background. In contrast to his own political stand on Chinese Indonesian issues (assimilation) and the New Order's more vigorous policies, Soe retains his Chinese name all his life, and participates passionately in the nation-building project with other citizens of various ethnic backgrounds. What Gie does not tell its viewers is that such an act was only possible for a few individuals in very small selected areas such as the capital city, Jakarta. Most Chinese Indonesians in the 1960s - even in Jakarta, but even more especially outside the capital city - had no choice but to succumb to the intimidating pressures of the New Order government by giving up their personal names and adopting more 'Indonesian-sounding' names, epitomized by none other than Soe's older brother Arief Budiman.

There has been due acknowledgment in public that Chinese Indonesians - like other ethnic groups - are heterogeneous, and that many are no less acculturated into the local living traditions and/or global cultures. But as the two films analysed above illustrate, such awareness does not usually take the next step and interrogate the dualism of the pribumihnon-pribumi divide and, hence, the 'artificiality' of ethnicity. In tandem with the rapid popularity of oriental-looking characters in imported television series in the early 2000s (in which connection the success of the Taiwanese-made Meteor Garden in 2002 remains unrivalled) (see Chapter 5), we see interesting developments in the more low-key films about teenagers and targeting teenagers. Compared with the protagonists in Ca-bau-kan and Gie, the presence of Chinese ethnic characters in these less respected films is politically much less problematic. Examples include the appearance of markedly Chinese Indonesians (30 Hari Mencari Cinta, 2004) or ethnically Chinese characters of another nationality (Brownies, 2005). These characters escape the usual stereotyping and they appear to be much more 'ordinary' Indonesians than the protagonists of Ca-bau-kan and Gie. This is not to suggest that the latter films are superior cinematically. As should be clear from the foregoing, these films are considered in this chapter with very specific purposes in mind.

Just as I completed this study, I had access to the much more acclaimed film Berbagi Suami (2006), and heard the report of the release of Photographs (2007). As in several light-hearted teenage films mentioned above, Chinese Indonesian characters appear in the award-winning Berbagi Suami
as ethnically unproblematic. The same appears to be the case with photographs. Unfortunately the release of these two recent films was too late for them to be included in this current analysis.

Very few Indonesians seriously consider the idea that ethnicity is a modern ‘fiction’, something that is socially constructed in specific and historically bound situations, being subject to deconstruction and reconstruction. The metaphor of ‘Chinese blood’ – if sometimes impure – that runs through a Chinese ‘body’ still dangerously prevails. Even staunch critics of the New Order’s racist policy, and advocates of universalist civil rights for this ethnic minority tend to subscribe to, and by extension reproduce, the fiction, equating ethnicity with descent, seeing ‘Chinese’ and ‘indigenous’ in the final analysis as two distinct entities, whose co-existence can be in harmony or conflict.

Because Chinese Indonesians have been widely perceived by both themselves and others mainly as a social group that the New Order repressed and humiliated, rather than ‘(re)-invented’, or ‘(re)constructed’, the main agenda of this group has been conceived of in terms of a revival or repressedness, indigenousness, and official conceptions of nationhood.

Radically questioning or ‘deconstructing’ the whole idea of ethnicity, Chinese in the citations are my own.

References to citations in this chapter are from the novel.

Similar trends can be seen in Indonesian literature and in films from other countries such as India.

11 Tan, the mother, is later identified ethnically as part-Betawi and part-Balinese (Sylado 1999:3).

12 Neither in the novel nor in the film did Cé-bau-kan give the historical context of the 1740 massacre. The same silence characterizes many citations of the incident in public discussion. Historian Merle Ricklefs has suggested that the impetus of the violence was the anti-Dutch and ‘rebellious’ acts of Chinese migrants in and around Batavia (Ricklefs 1993: 90–91). Had these been acts of the so-called pribumi, they would probably be recorded in the national history as a heroic struggle for the nation’s independence.

13 References to Gie are made to its published screenplay under the same title.

14 Compare this with the conscious attempt by Pramoedya Ananta Toer when writing his celebrated tetralogy from the penal island of Bum. During the early years of his exile (1965–79), Toer had access to only a few government-approved teen magazines. He reportedly examined the language and world-view in those magazines and was determined to write his novels to appeal to young people. To what extent this attempt succeeds is not my concern here. But it is worth noting that, in contrast to the protagonist in Gie, the protagonist Minke in Toer’s novel is a lot more adventurous politically, romantically, sexually, and intellectually. Minke works with and makes enemies of people of very different race and social classes, and marries more than one woman from more than one race.

15 I thank Nancy Florida and Webb Keane for their inspiring comments on this in response to my public presentation of a shorter version of this paper at Michigan University (April 2007).
5 Consuming Taiwanese boys culture

Watching Meteor Garden with urban Kampung women in Indonesia

Rachmah Ida

East Asian film and television productions in Mandarin have been shown on Indonesian television since the early 1990s. This is despite the well-documented history of tension between the nation’s Chinese ethnic minority and the so-called indigenous population in the central and western parts of the country, especially in the island of Java (see Chapter 4). At the time of writing, almost all national private television channels continue to run the so-called Asia Mandarin and Asia non-Mandarin TV serials, series, and single movies in their every day programming pattern. After the initial success of Hong Kong’s TV productions, the Indonesian private television stations searched for other sources of East Asian TV productions, such as Korea, Japan, and Taiwan in the last decade of the twentieth century.

In the early 2000s, Korean, Japanese, and Taiwanese TV youth dramas such as Meteor Garden, Winter Sonata, and Tokyo Love Story had a significant number of fans in the country. This is not to say that it is a new trend in Indonesia. What is significant in the more recent trend is the greater level and scope of acceptance in local television markets of the foreign and non-Western media products and pop cultures. Indeed, the present popularity of Asian productions in the Indonesian market can be seen as a triumph of Asian cultural productions in gaining positions once dominated by their American counterparts. However, the nature of the recent popularity of Asian television dramas in Indonesia and the way they are consumed by the domestic viewers in this context remains under-studied.

This chapter analyses the selected views among female urban kampung television viewers, and their responses to the portrayals of urban Taiwanese males and the latter’s cultural values in a popular imported TV drama, Meteor Garden. I will demonstrate how the television-watching experience of the local viewers, particularly when watching these ‘foreign’ Asian cultural productions, might be indicative of their social class, as well as their social positions in terms of age, gender, and particular kampung class-cultural setting (to be elaborated below). I will focus on the form of kampung women’s emotional engagements with the main characters as they appear in Meteor Garden.