

# Cultural Representation of Chinese-Indonesians in *Ca Bau Kan (The Courtesan)* in the Context of Spice Trading and Nationalism

Anton Sutandio<sup>1</sup>; Yohan Yusuf Arifin<sup>2</sup>

Universitas Kristen Maranatha, INDONESIA<sup>1,2</sup>

e-mail: anton.sutandio@lang.maranatha.edu<sup>1</sup>; yohan.ya@lang.maranatha.edu<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The object of this research is Nia Dinata's film, *Ca Bau Kan (The Courtesan)*, which was adapted from Remy Sylado's novel. The research focuses on the cultural representation of Chinese-Indonesians which pertains to the context of the maritime spice trade route and the concept of nationalism. Set in Batavia in three different decades, namely the 1930s, 1940s, and 1960s, the film depicts the journey of a Chinese-Indonesian character from the Dutch colonial era and the Japanese colonial era to the era of the independence revolution. The research method used is a qualitative method through film studies, which is juxtaposed with the semiotic approach to see how Chinese-Indonesians are represented in the film. The findings show that the film attempts to represent the Chinese-Indonesians accurately, albeit with the continuous presence of inaccurate stereotypes. The findings show Chinese-Indonesians' economic contribution that reflects the history of the spice trade maritime route in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Film Studies; *Ca Bau Kan*; Cultural Representation; Chinese-Indonesians; Spice Trading.

## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to analyze the 2002 film *Ca Bau Kan* against the background of the maritime trading history between Nusantara (Indonesia) and China in the context of the cultural representation of Chinese-Indonesians in the film. History has recorded that Chinese migrants played a significant part in maritime trading, including in the South East Asia region. The Chinese merchants had been collaborating with kingdoms in Nusantara since the 11th century including with Sriwijaya, Kahuripan, Kediri, and Majapahit kingdoms. The Chinese maritime expeditions and relationships with a number of kingdoms in Indonesia also opened the migration channel from China to Indonesia. Initially, they were visiting Nusantara (Indonesia) for a short transit. They decided to migrate for several reasons such as economical, natural disasters, and social unrest. By identifying how and why the film represents the ethnic Chinese against the backdrop of this historical event, this research wants to show that popular film can also serve as a medium of telling and preserving historical information more entertainingly.

*Ca Bau Kan* is chosen for several reasons, firstly, the film was the first film where an ethnic Chinese becomes the main character. Before *Ca Bau Kan*,

Chinese-Indonesians did not appear much on-screen due to the New Order regime policy on them. When they appear on-screen, their depiction is superficial and stereotypical. Secondly, adapted from a novel under the same title, the film talks about the life of the Chinese-Indonesian major character that covers three different periods: the Dutch colonial time, Japanese colonial time, and the revolution time towards Indonesian independence. Being inspired by true historical events, this film provides interesting visuals that can bring a deeper understanding of the role of Chinese-Indonesians in Indonesian history through their trading skills. Lastly, the fact that some ethnic Chinese artists played in the film makes it more authentic and fascinating to watch.

The novelty of this research lies in the fact that there has never been a similar topic discussion on the film *Ca Bau Kan*. There are some discussions on the film, for example, Heryanto's comment on *Ca Bau Kan* based on Sen's analysis suggests that the politics of representation of Chinese-Indonesian in Indonesian cinema is much more complex than Sen stated. However, Heryanto does not specifically and in detail analyze the film and its characters from the perspective of maritime trading. Another publication looks at the film from the theological point of view, in particular

the Christian view (Botara, 2015). The article focuses more on Giok Lan's characteristic which is forgiving those who rape her mother and kill her father. Other scholarly articles on the film or the novel include Sutandio (2014) discusses how the film attempts to centralize the marginalized ethnic Chinese. Herleni (2018) discusses the novel with the topic of life attitudes of the ethnic Chinese using a sociological approach. Asmarani (2015) also discusses the novel through the cultural deconstruction approach in the context of power. Meutia (2017) also focuses on the character Tinung in the film version, using a gender approach. Sholehuddin's (2013) bachelor thesis discusses the original novel from the perspective of literary anthropology and educational values. Sabakti (2013) discusses the narrative structure of the novel as a semiotic analysis. Raditiyanto (2018) discusses the novel from the perspective of an intertextual semiotic approach in the context of prostitution history in the novel. Hendiawan and Rahmansyah (2019) look at the film's landscape as a cultural identity. There are more scholarly articles both on the novel and the film version, however, none of them discusses the film in the context of maritime trading, which makes this research is necessary to do to offer a fresh perspective on the film.

Since the birth of cinema in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, filmmaking has never been separated from the concept of cultural representation. Film has its language that produces visual representation through various kinds of media. For instance, the first publicly screened short recording by Lumiere's brother *Workers Leaving the Lumiere's Factory* (1895) shows the factory workers going home at the end of the day. Lumiere simply puts the camera in front of the factory gate and recorded the flow of the workers leaving the factory. The 45-second film shows a partial representation of the workers' daily activity. In another instance, many of Sergei Eisenstein's films represent the socialist society as a reflection of his Marxist Soviet Union ideological framework. In France, the filmmaker Godard represents the French bourgeois society in many of his films as a reflection of his cultural framework (Kiernan, 1990, p. 93). There are many other instances of how films represent certain societies, groups of people, or ideologies.

In the era of the internet, film as one of the most widely available media that people can access today can be a powerful tool of empowerment, but at the same time also disempowerment. Cultural representation can both challenge and support the status quo. In the context of ethnicity, film as one media of cultural representation always faces challenges when it comes to representing certain ethnic as there are many variables involved in constructing the representation,

such as who makes it, when it is produced, what the purpose is, who the target audience is, and who plays in the film. The recent popularity of Jordan Peele's films such as *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019) that represent the African-Americans culture differently compared to other popular Hollywood films are a good example of how powerful the effect of cultural representation in empowering the minority and challenging the status quo. In the context of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, *Ca Bau Kan* becomes the first film that exclusively showcases an ethnic Chinese as the main character.

This nature of filmmaking to construct and give meaning to cultural representation becomes even more significant within a multi-ethnic nation like Indonesia. Indonesia has "...over 700 ethnic groups with distinct languages (not dialects) and traditions..." (Yuwanto, 2012, p. 117). Among those ethnicities, Chinese-Indonesians are one ethnic that have been experiencing different treatments throughout Indonesian history. Urban (2013, p. 1) argues that "The construction of identity among the ethnic Chinese populations in Indonesia has been a complex process. The temporal and spatial formulation of identity has allowed for continual change in which marginalization and discrimination have resulted." The long history of discrimination and repression of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia can be rooted in the Dutch colonialization period when the colonials apply the "*divide et impera*" policy to segregate ethnics in Indonesia so that they will not form a union. The ethnic Chinese, being good at trading, have a better position in the hierarchical structure constructed by the colonials. The indigenous becomes the lowest in the structure and this condition creates sentiment that perpetuates to this day, especially by the New Order regime of Soeharto (1966-1998) for their political ends.

In the context of film, Sutandio (2019, p. 276) argues that "Chinese descendants have been and are still an important part of the development of the national cinema" although their roles are mostly behind the screen as producers or production house. Not until the 21<sup>st</sup> century that numbers of ethnic Chinese emerge as artists on screen that represent the Chinese ethnic. The cultural representation of Chinese-Indonesians on screen has always been stereotypical, displaying mostly their obvious physical or verbal traits, which are not reflecting their true identity.

*Ca Bau Kan* is "the first Indonesian film to reconfigure and relive the long-abandoned 'realistic' portrayal of Chinese-Indonesians after 32 years of 'hibernation'" (Sutandio, 2014, p. 264). In Indonesian popular films from 1945 to 2002, Chinese-Indonesian characters rarely have significant positions on-screen other than an ethnic display. The discourse in *Ca Bau Kan* relates

to the lives of Chinese-Indonesians in pre-independent Indonesia, and thus the audience should frame the meaning of their cultural representation within that period with all their specific characteristics, although it should be understood that the role of director is also significant in the construction of meaning.

The film revolves around the lives of the two major characters, Sri Noerhajati or Tinung, a poor native Indonesian woman, and Tan Peng Liang, a wealthy Chinese-Indonesian from Semarang who comes to Batavia. Tinung, who is treated as a sexual object almost throughout her young life, meets Tan Peng Liang in Batavia during a folk festival. Peng Liang adores her dancing and singing skill called “cokek” (a social dance) and is willing to double her pay so she can sing and dance privately for him. Gradually, Peng Liang falls in love with Tinung and marries her despite Peng Liang’s married status. Peng Liang’s wife is bedridden and that becomes his excuse to marry Tinung. Throughout the film, Tinung has to fight to get her freedom as a woman and to release herself from the stigma of being a *ca bau kan* (courtesan/prostitute), while Peng Liang has to fight against fellow Chinese-Indonesian businessmen to realize his agenda of defeating the colonizers through economic superiority, and later helping the revolutionary group to fight the Japanese.

## METHOD

This research is qualitative and interdisciplinary research that combines film studies and semiotic approach. The elements of film studies in focus are the cinematography and *misè-en-scène*. Cinematography is simply defined as camerawork that refers to how and where the camera and the lighting are positioned to create certain effects or emphasize certain conditions. *Misè-en-scène* refers to everything that the audience sees on-screen, for instance, costumes, make-up, actors, sound, dialogue, or special effects. Semiotic approach is applied to interpret the underlying meaning of signs or symbols that the film shows through its visualization. The research begins with multiple screenings of the film to collect visual data from the cinematography and *misè-en-scène* that relate to the topic. After that, the visual data are put against the semiotic approach to be interpreted so that the meanings produced can be drawn. The findings provide understanding on how and why the Chinese-Indonesians are represented in such a way in the film.

## DISCUSSION

*Ca Bau Kan* is the first post-New Order regime film that puts Indonesian Chinese ethnicity as its main characters. Never before, at least since the birth year of

Indonesian cinema in 1950, the ethnic Chinese is put in the spotlight in a film. Most of the time, their portrayal in films is merely ornamental and stereotypical. Indeed, *Ca Bau Kan* still depicts certain stereotypes of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, but they also show different aspects of the ethnic Chinese’s lives that are never seen before. That way, the audience is exposed to a more dynamic representation of them instead of the static and stereotypical ones. In doing so, the film takes certain historical accounts of Chinese-Indonesians particularly between the year 1933 to 1960 in Batavia. The discussion of the film is divided into two parts, the setting of place and the Chinese-Indonesian characters.

### Setting of Place

The film’s period is from 1933 to 1960, covering the Dutch colonization period (1930-1942), Japanese occupation (1942-1945), and independence period (1945-1960). Historically, the 1930s marks the peak of Chinese immigrants that reached more than half a million people and many of them settled in big cities in Java such as Batavia, Semarang, and Surabaya. The film particularly shows three significant historical places in Batavia related to the Chinese-Indonesians: Glodok, Kalijodo (Kali Angke), and Sunda Kalapa. Other important places outside Batavia are Srigunting in Kudus and Sam Poo Kong in Semarang. The film also mentions Peng Liang’s house in Chaulan Street, Batavia. Chaulan street today is Gajah Mada street in Glodok area. This small detail shows the film’s attempt to be as accurate as possible with the history. Those places are closely related to the history of Chinese-Indonesians especially in the context of the tobacco business that the film shows.

Since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the ethnic Chinese live close together as a community in a Chinatown (*pecinan*) located in Glodok area, Batavia. Today, Glodok is still the hub for Chinese-Indonesian businesses and is also known as the center of electronic goods in today’s Jakarta. The film shows this explicitly through dialogues and visualization. Peng Liang’s and Boen Hiap’s tobacco warehouses are both located in Glodok (see figure 1 and 2), almost stands side by side. This shows that Glodok has always been an important business place for the ethnic Chinese. Historically, it is the Dutch colonial that localized the ethnic Chinese in Glodok area after the 1740 massacre by the VOC so that they can have easier control and surveillance of the ethnic Chinese (Fatimah, 2014, p. 129). During one scene, Boen Hiap mentions his high-quality tobacco that comes from Sumatra. Historically, a large-scale tobacco plantation in Indonesia was initiated by a Dutch named J. Nienhujs in East Sumatra in the 19<sup>th</sup>

century. At first, the involvement of the ethnic Chinese in the plantation is as workers who are brought from Penang island and mainland China (Wibowo, 2015). The high-quality Sumatra tobacco, as Boen Hiap mentions, is for export and local market, so what Boen Hiap mentions is aligned with the history. One time, Peng Liang buys Boen Hiap's high-quality tobacco under a different name, sending the tobacco to his warehouse in Srigoenting, Kudus, and from there the tobacco is shipped back to Peng Liang's warehouse in Glodok. His strategy makes Boen Hiap furious that leads him to burn Peng Liang's warehouse during the Chinese New Year. Their dynamic shows that fierce competition sometimes occurs between ethnic Chinese businessmen.



**Figure 1.** Peng Liang's warehouse in Glodok, Batavia  
Source: Dinata, 2002, 0:40:27



**Figure 2.** Boen Hiap's warehouse in Glodok, Batavia  
Source: Dinata, 2002, 0:38:31

In terms of the development of Batavia/Jakarta, the era is part of the period of modern Jakarta development (1920-2009). Glodok is located in the southern part of the Dutch colonial fort, and the reason why the ethnic Chinese are allowed to occupy the region is that the VOC Governor-General at that time, Jan Pieterszoon Coen believes that the ethnic Chinese are "a resilient and hardworking ethnic...there's no better ethnic group that suits our purpose or that can be deployed just as easily as the Chinese ethnic" (Matanasi, 2017).

The second important place is Kalijodo (Kali Angke). Kalijodo, which literally means "river of lover," is not a name of a certain region, it derives from the ethnic

Chinese tradition, *Peh Cun*. During that celebration, the Chinese migrants in Batavia come to the riverbank of Kali Angke (the actual name of Kalijodo) to sing and recite poems on decorated boats. The boats are occupied by either men or women and when some of them are attracted to each other, they show it by throwing a cake made of flour and beans, wrapped in banana leaves (*bacang*) to each other (Permanasari & Lientino, 2018, p. 14). In its development, Kalijodo becomes a prostitution place for the Chinese migrants who are longing for sexual intimacy. The film shows this visually through the scene at Kalijodi at night when there are many boats along the river which function as the "rooms" for the prostitutes and their customers (see figure 3). Kalijodo is also the place where Peng Liang meets Tinung, who at that time unwillingly, due to her poor condition, becomes a prostitute. It is from this place that the term *ca bau kan* emerges, which is roughly translated as a courtesan, or mistress to rich Chinese men. Kalijodo remains a site for illegal prostitution until 2016 when the Jakarta governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, transformed the 15.000 square meter area into a Child-Friendly Integrated Public Space (Ruang Publik Terpadu Ramah Anak/RPTRA) as seen in image 4. (Simatupang, 2017, p. 47).



**Figure 3.** The Kalijodo scene  
Source: Dinata, 2002, 0:05:27



**Figure 4.** Kalijodo today  
Source: Tobing, 2017

The third place is Sunda Kalapa harbor, the first important harbor in Batavia, which is located just about 5 km away from Glodok area.

“In the 9th century, the Sunda kingdom emerged as one of Srivijaya’s vassals; in this period the name Kalapa (Sundanese for ‘coconut’) started to be known as one of Sunda’s port cities on the north coast of West Java. Sailors and traders from China, India, East, and Europe frequented Kalapa as part of their trading routes to the Spice Islands in the east and also to Banten and other ports on Sumatra’s coastline” (Gultom, 2018, p. 2).

Sunda Kalapa harbor has a very significant role in creating what we know as Jakarta today. It is also an important part of the history of silk route trading. Although today it is no longer functions as the main harbor, its history remains important today, especially as the entry point of many Chinese migrants to Batavia which occurred between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century. The film shows this during a scene when Peng Liang returns to Batavia (see figure 5) after years of running away from the Dutch authority after he is found guilty of money counterfeiting. He is shown to be very emotional when he finally returns to the place that he is familiar with.



**Figure 5.** The scene when Peng Liang returns to Batavia  
Source: Dinata, 2002, 1:22:19

### The Chinese-Indonesian characters

The discussion of the characters will be divided into two parts: the surnames and the characteristics. Both are interesting to discuss as they represent the multi-dimensional aspects of the ethnic Chinese that have never been seen before in the popular Indonesian film before *Ca Bau Kan*. The discussion of the ethnic Chinese characters’ surnames is particularly done to crosscheck the film’s accuracy in choosing those names to the history of the Chinese migrants to Indonesia, particularly Batavia.

There are 13 main ethnic Chinese characters, Tan’s family: Tan Peng Liang, Tan Giok Lan (Peng Liang’s daughter), Tan Kim Hok and Tan Kim San (Peng

Liang’s sons), and Tan Soen Bie (Peng Liang’s right-hand man). Then there are the members of the Batavia Kong Koan (*Gongguan*) Assembly: Thio Boen Hiap, Oey Eng Goan, Liem Kiem Jang, Lie Kok Pien, Kwee Tjwie Sien, and Timothy Wu. The other two characters are Njoo Tek Hong, a musician who owns a *cokek* dance troupe, and Tjia Wan Sen, a lone young ethnic Chinese who also likes Tinung. Apart from Tan’s family, the other characters have different surnames. Like many cultures in the world, the ethnic Chinese also believe that one’s name can determine one’s fortune or misfortune. Historically,

“The four predominant groups who migrated to Indonesia were the Hokkien, Hakka, Teochiu, and Cantonese—each of them with a distinct language, economy, and culture. Due to their distinct specializations, each group populated different areas and islands in Indonesia. The Hakka migrated to West Kalimantan, the Hokkien located to Java and Sumatra, the Teochiu lived in Java, Sumatra, and the Riau Islands, and the Cantonese spread across the archipelago” (Urban, 2013, p. 2).

The majority of the Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia is coming from three provinces in China: Fujian, Guangdong, and Hainan and most of them who come to Java (Hokkien) is coming from Fujian. Based on the data from the Chinese-Indonesian Social Clan Association (Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia), almost all of the surnames mentioned above are in the top ten of Chinese-Indonesian surnames (Britto, 2020): Tan (Chen (陈) in Chinese), Thio (Zhang (张)), Oey (Huang (黄)), Liem (Lin (林)), Lie (Li (李)), Tjia (Xie (谢)), and Go (Wú (吴)). In China itself, the family name “Lie” is “the second most common surname in China, shared by over 100 million people worldwide” (Lie & Bailey, 2017, p. 82), with Wang as the first most common surname. However, the surnames Wang or Ong in Indonesia are not as many as those surnames mentioned above. Thus, it can be concluded that the surnames chosen for those fictional characters are aligned with the actual history of the Chinese migrants’ families who come to Indonesia.

Apart from the surnames, the film also mentions the existence of Kong Kuan (Gongguan) Council in Batavia. The Chinese Council, known also as the Kong Koan, was

“a semi-autonomous ethnic organization that collaborated with the Dutch colonial government in administering the Chinese community by collecting taxes, explaining, and passing on government rules, and settling disputes.

Other activities included the supervision and coordination of social and religious matters, including education, marriage registration, cemeteries, public ceremonies, and temple management” (Erkelens, 2013, p. 25).

These councils can be found in big cities such as Batavia, Surabaya, and Semarang from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are chosen by the Dutch governor-general, and usually consist of wealthy Chinese businessmen, but they still have to submit to the higher authority and laws, that is the Dutch colonials. The film depicts the Kong Kuan’s members as rich people from the way they look and from how they stand out and are respected by other characters. They also have a headquarter where they regularly meet (see figure 6). Since they regulate everything within their community, the arrival of the arrogant and rich Peng Liang from Semarang is a matter for them. They dislike Peng Liang’s attitude and they want to get rid of him.



**Figure 6.** The Kong Kuan member in their headquarter  
Source: Dinata, 2002, 0:17:25

Peng Liang’s presence in Batavia draws attention from the local Kong Kuan council that looks at him as a competitor and a threat to their business and pride. Peng Liang’s arrogance in showing off his wealth and his attempt to get close to the Dutch authority rises the Kong Kuan council’s anger as he is seen to be overstepping the boundary. Peng Liang’s wealth turns out to be coming from counterfeiting money. The tobacco business is just a cover for his illegal business although he claims that his action is a form of resistance against the Dutch colonial. He believes that the natives will not win against the colonizers through a war with guns, but it can be won through economic war. Thus, Peng Lian faces two battlefronts, one against the Dutch colonizers and the other against the envious fellow Chinese businessmen. At the end of the story that occurs in 1960, Peng Liang meets his tragic end when he is poisoned by one of the Kong Koan council members. The existence of the Kong Koan council in the film provides another historical fact from where the audience can learn that there is a strong bond among the ethnic Chinese within a community and at the same time one can see a sense of competition when it comes to business and a newcomer to the area.

The second part is the portrayal of the ethnic Chinese characters. The discussion will be divided into two parts, the physical and psychological (inner) characteristics. The physical discussion relates to their appearance, what they wear and what they do (ritual/tradition). Physically, all ethnic Chinese characters in the film are portrayed stereotypically: fair-skinned with slanted eyes (see figure 7). Some of them have a traditional queue hairstyle that is traditionally worn by male subjects of the Qing dynasty along with the typical hat that goes with the hairstyle, as seen from the characters Tan Peng Liang from Tamim (there are two characters named Tan Peng Liang, both fall in love with Tinung) (see figure 7) and Tjia Wan Sen (see figure 8).



**Figure 7.** Tan Peng Liam Tamim  
Source: Dinata, 2002, 0:08:05



**Figure 8.** Tjia Wan Sen  
Source: Dinata, 2002, 0:11:47

Most of the ethnic Chinese characters are wearing the traditional Chinese clothing *dagua* (as seen in figures 8 and 9) and some wear a western suit, such as the character Timothy Wu in image 8 (the second character from the left) and Peng Liang. Throughout the film the character Timothy Wu is depicted wearing a western suit and a hat.



**Figure 9.** The Kong Kuan council members wearing *dagua*, except for Timothy Wu  
Source: Dinata, 2002, 0:13:54

As the major character, Peng Liang's physical appearance is more varied, he sometimes wears *dagua* but most of the time he wears a western suit and a hat, which suggests that he is a person who can adapt easily to the situation he is in (see figure 10).



**Figure 10.** Tan Peng Liang in Batavia (left) and in Semarang with his mother (right)

Source: Dinata, 2002, 0:13:54 and 0:33:57

The film also mentions at least four traditions/rituals of the ethnic Chinese, namely the Chinese New Year, Cioko Festival, visiting the parents' tomb, and the tradition of giving *hongbao* (money in a red envelope). All these traditions once are not allowed to be openly celebrated in Indonesia since 1966 (except for visiting the parents' tomb which is a private event), and not until the year 2000 that the Chinese-Indonesians are allowed to celebrate them again. The film is released in 2001, thus it indirectly serves as a celebration of regaining their freedom, expressing their Chinese-ness, and showcasing the multidimensional aspect of the Chinese-Indonesians.

The tradition of giving *hongbao* during the Chinese New Year is highlighted in the film as an opportunity for the Chinese-Indonesians to bribe the authority without making it look like obvious bribery. For instance, in two separate occasions, Tan Peng Liang is depicted to be giving a *hongbao* to a Dutch authority after an incident that causes his tobacco warehouse to be burnt down (see figure 11). The second one is when he gives the *hongbao* to some journalists with the hope that they will not write anything bad about him.



**Figure 11.** Peng Liang attempts to bribe a Dutch authority by offering him a *hongbao*

Source: Dinata, 2002, 0:45:30

On both occasions, he argues that giving *hongbao* is a normal thing to do during the Chinese New Year and that rejecting it will be considered an offense to the Chinese-Indonesians. This *hongbao* tradition, although a part of the Chinese New Year tradition, is highlighted in the film as a means by Peng Liang to collude with the powerful. In a way, the action suggests two other stereotypes of the Chinese-Indonesians: being wealthy and cunning in doing business. One may understand why they do this because living as migrants and minorities in another country means they have to be smart and resourceful to guarantee their survival and safety.

Apart from the stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese-Indonesian characters, the film offers a different portrayal that has never been depicted before regarding the Chinese-Indonesian. First, not all of them are wealthy, as can be seen in the character Tjia Wan Sen, who is good at fighting (which is another stereotype of ethnic Chinese). The film does not explain his job or background, only that he is in love with Tinung and he wants Tinung to live with him. His role in the film is important when he collaborates with the native journalist to reveal Peng Liang's illegal business. His motive is love and revenge, which makes him a romantic, just like Peng Liang. Being romantic is another non-stereotypical depiction of the Chinese-Indonesian characters. In the end, Wan Sen realizes that he is targeting a wrong person as there is another character with the same name.

The character Njoo Tek Hong offers another non-typical Chinese-Indonesian: he is an artist (musician and dancer) and is depicted as a sissy person (see figure 12). Tek Hong is the character who trains Tinung to become a popular *cokek* dancer and singer. His unique characteristic is refreshing in a way it adds another dimension to the general portrayal of the Chinese-Indonesian characters.



**Figure 12.** The sissy character Njoo Tek Hong plays a musical instrument  
Source: Dinata, 2002, 0:18:28

Another non-stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese-Indonesians is that some of them are portrayed as a womanizer. Tan Peng Liang, Peng Liang from Tamim, and Tjia Wan Sen are three characters, among other minor characters, who do not treat women respectfully. All of them like Tinung but before they all fall in love with her, they only see and treat her as a courtesan/prostitute. This negative stereotype is never seen in other films depicting Chinese-Indonesian characters before, thus it is interesting to discuss why this stereotype appears in the film. Historically, Chinese culture, like many other cultures in the world, is patriarchal, based on the Confucian patriarchal system that privileges the masculine over the feminine. “Confucianism requires women to be obedient to men, not to receive education, not to get paid work, to carry on the family line as a mission, and to honor this observance for the entirety of their respective lifetimes” (Chang, 2020, p. 1). That is also why when Peng Liang’s wife can no longer give him sexual satisfaction, Peng Liang makes it an excuse to find another woman, and even his mother cannot forbid him from doing so. Besides, there are no significant female Chinese characters in the film. There are only three scenes where they appear: the first one is Peng Liang’s bedridden wife who surrenders with the situation, the second one is the scene when Peng Liang returns to Semarang and meets his mother, and the third one is the scene when Boen Hiap is in court accompanied by his wife. They are all portrayed to be submissive and passive, in contrast with the male characters. Another reason for their portrayal as a womanizer because historically, many Chinese migrants who come to Batavia are single or married men who leave their family back in China, thus to fulfill their sexual drive, they look for prostitute (*ca bau kan*) which leads them to womanize the native prostitute and sometimes make them their mistress just what both Peng Liang does in the film. Albeit downgrading the Chinese-Indonesians’ portrayal, the film tries to be as accurate as possible with the history no matter how bad it is.

The Chinese-Indonesian characters in the film, especially the Kong Koan council and Peng Liang, are also

depicted to be political, in contrast with the stereotype of contemporary Chinese-Indonesians who are usually apolitical. The way the Kong Koan council is established, their relationship with the authority, and how they regulate the community are all political. They use their position to gain power and trust from the authority which in the end guarantees their safety and survival. Peng Liang does the same, once he arrives in Batavia, he approaches the Dutch authority to gain their trust and it is the right move considering that he has a hidden agenda against the Dutch. The portrayal of the Chinese-Indonesian characters’ being political is fresh as it signifies the involvement of Chinese-Indonesians in the fight for independence and later in the revolutionary war against the allied who want to re-colonize Indonesia. Later in 2005, a film titled *Gie* is released to commemorate a Chinese-Indonesian activist, Soe Hok Gie, who is active during the tumultuous time in the mid of 1960s.

The last non-stereotypical depiction of the Chinese-Indonesians regarding their inner quality is being nationalistic, which is represented by Tan Peng Liang. Being a shady, cunning businessperson and a romantic womanizer, Peng Liang is also depicted as an ethnic Chinese who want to see East Indies free from colonization. His illegal business counterfeiting money to fight the Dutch from the economic front and his weapon smuggling business to defeat the Japanese occupation show that Peng Liang is patriotic although the nation Indonesia does not exist yet. He has a strong attachment to the East Indies and wants to see it stand on its foot. Her love for Tinung, a native, becomes the realization of his love for the nation. Peng Liang also shows changes after he returns to East Indies from years of living abroad to avoid being recaptured by the Dutch authority. He is no longer depicted as a womanizer, once he returns to East Indies, he looks for Tinung who becomes *jugun ianfu* (military comfort woman) during the Japanese occupation. One may think that Peng Liang will forget Tinung and move on with his life, yet he searches for her and finds her in a hospital. Peng Liang helps Tinung regain her confidence and they live together until Peng Liang’s tragic death. In one scene he says that he only wants to live peacefully and he achieves his dream near the end of the film before he is poisoned in his own house by one of the Kong Koan members, Eng Goan. Historically, the ethnic Chinese has been politically active in fighting for the Independence of the East Indies. Hapsari (2016) argues that Chinese nationalism is already seen in the 1920s when several ethnic Chinese join the Indonesian national movement for independence. From the journalistic side, the daily Sin Po became the first newspaper to broadcast the Indonesia Raya anthem in November 1928 and Sin Po also spread the name Indonesia to change the name Dutch

East Indies. The ethnic Chinese was also active in politics when they founded the Indonesian Chinese Party (PTI) on September 25, 1932. Also, one ethnic Chinese, Jap Tjwan Bing, was involved in formalizing the 1945 Constitution. The last two characteristics of Peng Liang—being political and having a nationalistic spirit—are the most significant as they become an eye-opener to the general audience who most likely are unaware of the contribution of Chinese-Indonesians in the struggle for independence from colonization. Although Peng Liang is a fictional character, his portrayal brings a new and fresh understanding of the ethnic Chinese and their multidimensional characteristics.

## CONCLUSION

The findings show that the film, although fictional, manages to depict the dynamic lives of the ethnic Chinese against the historical background as accurate as it can be through the portrayal of the characters, their traits, appearance, and traditions. By portraying the characters stereotypically and non-stereotypically, the film offers new insights to the audience on the ethnic Chinese's lives in general. This is progress compared to other popular films that depict Chinese-Indonesians before *Ca Bau Kan*. The inner quality stereotypes of the ethnic Chinese that the film depicts are being exclusive, as seen from how they live and regulate their community under the Kong Koan council; hardworking, industrious but frugal, as represented by Peng Liang and Boen Hiap who have a tobacco business; wealthy, as seen from most of the Chinese-Indonesians' characters; and cunning, especially in doing business, as seen from how Peng Liang approaches the authority and the press by subtly bribing them with *hongbao*, and from Peng Liang's illegal money counterfeiting and weapon smuggling business. Physically, the film portrays all the ethnic Chinese characters according to the mainstream belief: fair skin, slanted eyes, dressed in certain costumes, and speak both Mandarin and Bahasa with a certain accent, although not all of the artists are of ethnic Chinese. The film also depicts a stereotypical tradition of the ethnic Chinese such as the Chinese New Year celebration and the *hongbao* tradition.

However, the film also offers a non-stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese-Indonesians. Before, the ethnic Chinese's portrayal on-screen is always shown as a homogenous group. However, *Ca Bau Kan* shows that the ethnic Chinese are heterogenous, for instance, the ethnic Chinese in Batavia represented by the Kong Koan council does not warmly welcome Peng Liang from Semarang. Besides, they all have different surnames which are an important aspect of the ethnic Chinese's identity and ancestry. One can also see the

harsh rivalry among the ethnic Chinese that leads to the tragic end for Peng Liang that emphasizes that they are not a homogenous group. The film also depicts the ethnic Chinese, especially the male, to be womanizers, while the female to be submissive and passive. This situation is aligned with the history of the ethnic Chinese in Batavia and with the patriarchal system that is still held strongly by the ethnic Chinese community, even to this day. Another non-stereotypical portrayal of the ethnic Chinese is that they are political and having a nationalistic spirit, as represented by Tan Peng Liang. Overall, the relationship dynamic the film shows through the conflicts between the ethnic Chinese characters, their competition, their strategy in winning the heart of the authority, their stereotypical and non-stereotypical characteristics, and the nationalistic side of the ethnic Chinese as seen from Peng Liang's action is a refreshing perspective of the ethnic Chinese's portrayal in a popular film.

Regarding the spice trading history, the film shows it through the setting of the place. Firstly, it mentions the tobacco business owned by Peng Liang from Semarang and Boen Hiap from Batavia. In one of Boen Hiap's dialogues, he mentions his tobacco plantation in Sumatra. This tobacco business narrative is aligned with the historical account, that the best tobacco at that time comes from Sumatra and is exported to Europe and the East Indies. History also records that the ethnic Chinese dominate the tobacco business in Indonesia after the Dutch colonials are driven out of Indonesia. The reference to Srigunting in Kudus reminds the audience of Djarum Kudus, one of the biggest tobacco companies in Indonesia today. The film also depicts some historical sites in Batavia, such as Glodok, Kalijodo, and Sunda Kalapa harbor. All these places are important sites in the history of spice trading in the East Indies that involve the ethnic Chinese.

In conclusion, Tan Peng Liang and the other ethnic Chinese characters bring a fresh and new dimension of the ethnic Chinese characters that have never been seen before in Indonesian popular films. Indeed, *Ca Bau Kan*, albeit a fictional story, becomes a trailblazer film that opens a new front of exploration of the Chinese-Indonesians' lives on screen. Eventually, Peng Liang's ultimate dream may reflect the dream of all ethnic Chinese living in Indonesia, that is to live peacefully in the place and with the woman he loves.

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