

## CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE-INDONESIANS' TRAUMA IN JASON ISKANDAR *THE DAY THE SKY ROARED*

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### ABSTRACT

*This research analyzed a contemporary independent Indonesian film entitled *The Day the Sky Roared* (2015) that was directed by Jason Iskandar. This 10-minute silent film talked about the anxiety of Chinese-Indonesians through the eyes of a mother and her daughter regarding the historical trauma of the May 1998 tragedy. The fact that the film was produced about 17 years after the tragedy suggested the director's awareness that the trauma remained due to the absence of reconciliation and closure. This research would show how the short film frames the incident and trauma of the Chinese-Indonesians. The research was a combination of trauma studies and film studies that focuses on the visual analysis of the film's cinematography and mise-en-scene to show the cinematic representation of Chinese-Indonesians' trauma. The findings show that the portrayal of Chinese-Indonesians still strongly suggests unrelieved psychological discomfort, albeit, at different levels, that is closely related to the traumatic past and the pervasive stereotyping of Chinese-Indonesians.*

**Keywords:** Chinese-Indonesians trauma, cinematic representation, film studies

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of Indonesia as far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese-Indonesians have gone through rough times living as a minority. Often, they are double vilified both as Chinese-ethnic and non-Moslem. Unlike other ethnics in Indonesia, such as Arab or Indian, ethnic Chinese is still seen as 'non-pribumi' or non-indigenous, although they have been living in Indonesia for hundreds of years. During the post-reformation era, Chinese-Indonesians gain more access to politics, as Setijadi (2016) has stated that politically, Chinese-Indonesians now have greater representation and participation than ever before. However, far from being unified, their political views and aspirations are incredibly diverse. This greater opportunity does not mean that the Chinese-Indonesians are free from ethnic discrimination. Actually, they are under stricter scrutiny as a government official, and if they take a wrong move, they will be vilified.

The well-known case is the case of Indonesian-Chinese and Christian Jakarta governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), who has to spend two years in jail after the court decided that he is guilty in the case of blasphemy in 2017. Despite claims that the case is purely a religious-context case, one can clearly see that the case is political

and ethnic. The fact that the case happens only strengthens that violence and vilification of the minority still continue, although not to the extent as occurred in May 1998. In addition, as the May 1998 tragedy is never fully reconciled, the trauma for Chinese-Indonesians still remains and haunts them, fearing that similar incidents could happen again in the future.

As the most visually dynamic product of culture, films have been used to talk about historical or psychological trauma and vice versa. Films also often offer a unique perspective on the past, mixing collective and personal memories, expressions of the regime language, and images that can spark memories for the generations who directly experienced the past, but which also construct new symbols for the second or third generations (Adam & Mitroiu, 2016). Thus, films have always been a strong medium to channel traumas in effective ways.

The study of trauma, in general, is dominated by studies of the Western historical trauma, namely the Holocaust, Vietnam War, or the 9/11 tragedy. Historical trauma is defined as an unresolved trauma resulting in grief that continues to impact the lives of survivors and subsequent generations (Grayshield et al., 2015). The discussion of historical trauma that occurred elsewhere is substantially less compared to that of the west. Thus, it is important to

show how suffering resulted from political/cultural conflict is represented outside the west. The case of the historical trauma of May 1998 in Indonesia is a fine example of how unreconciled trauma, coupled with ethnical sentiment leads to suffering and anxiety of the minority that is the Chinese-Indonesians. The common racial trauma that is experienced by Chinese-Indonesians includes overt racial slurs and threats made in any environment by anyone, community violence, and workplace discrimination (Williams, 2018).

The theory used to dissect the trauma in the film is from Cathy Caruth, in which she argues that trauma is always received in delay, it keeps coming back to a person even after the traumatic event as such is finished (in Sulaberidze, 2016). Images in the film serve as the instrument that visually brings back the past trauma. She further argues that trauma is a socio-historical phenomenon, similar to the trauma experienced by Chinese-Indonesians. Therefore she has said that the subject of trauma is relevant not only to psychological and psychic research but to artworks as well, especially visual art, because to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event (Sulaberidze, 2016).

*The Day the Sky Roared* that is directed by Iskandar (2015), explicitly refers to the 1998 tragedy, which causes not only material loss due to the destruction of buildings, but more importantly, death of people and trauma to the surviving victims most of whom are Chinese-Indonesians. The tragedy is initially triggered by the Asian financial crisis in 1998. Indonesian people, in particular, the students, blame the Indonesian crisis on the government under Soeharto, which is known to be authoritative and corrupt. Thus, massive demonstrations occurred in Jakarta that is led by students, demand Soeharto to step down after more than 30 years in power. During the chaotic situation, several students are shot to death by the military, and the incident leads to mass anarchism when people loot stores and target Chinese-Indonesians. It is reported that hundreds of Chinese-Indonesian women are sexually abused and harassed, even killed. To this day, the rape case of May 1998 is never revealed and reconciled. It is still unclear who provokes the mass movement as the situation at that time is chaotic.

The tragedy happens between May 13-15, 1998, and to this day, Chinese-Indonesians never deserve justice or reconciliation regarding the tragedy. This unhealed wound will become a trauma that haunts the victim. In fact, the ethnical sentiment is pervasive, and it may occur again in the future, because historically Chinese-Indonesians have been subjected to the 'othering', first by the Dutch colonials and then by the government, especially during the New Order regime. The wound that the colonizers and the New Order regime brought is still unhealed. The word trauma itself means 'wound' in Greek, which underlines the importance of addressing any trauma as something that needs to be healed. Chinese-Indonesians still carry the psychological and physical wounds in their memory (Kristiono, 2018). Since the wound is not healed, it is passed down to the younger generations through the narration of memories of what happened in the past.

Memories play an important role in trauma studies; in fact, it is closely related to memory studies. In the context of this analysis, films serve as a visual memory of a certain traumatic event that can trigger the traumatic experience as well as bring about awareness from people who do not experience the trauma. Trauma is seen as a cultural process that is closely connected with the formation of emergent collective memory and the collective identity of a group

(Ferron & Massa, 2014). Indeed, the cultural process of Chinese-Indonesian includes a traumatic experience that, in time, also shapes the collective identity of Chinese-Indonesians.

In the context of Indonesian cinema, Chinese descendants have been and are still an important part of the development of the national cinema. Said in Paramaditha (2017) has claimed that the commercialism of cinema is rooted in the origin of Indonesian cinema as a commodity produced and consumed by Chinese Indonesians. So their roles are not only as producers, but also consumers, directors, and actors/actresses. However, during the 1950s to late 21<sup>st</sup> century, their role becomes merely a complement to other themes or making the Chinese-ness theme as a propagandistic instrument towards certain interests, especially regarding the government's interest (Rokhani, 2017).

Not until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that some films about and starred by Chinese-Indonesians are produced, albeit not many and not successful commercially. For example, *Ca Bau Kan* (2002) which is adapted from Remy Silado's novel and *Karma* (2008), and a horror film with Chinese-Indonesians background, directed by Allan Lunardi. Unfortunately, both films in many ways still portray the Chinese-Indonesians in an artificial and decorative manner, thus (unconsciously) perpetuate Chinese-Indonesians stereotypes. The fact that the films are distributed in major chain movie theaters may explain why the stereotyping presents, perhaps considering the commercial and audience aspects. However, there are also numbers of independent films production about Chinese-Indonesians which attempt to portray Chinese-ness from a different perspective, such as *Babi Buta Ingin Terbang* (2008), *9809: Antologi 10 Tahun Reformasi* (2008). All of which are distributed independently outside the mainstream cinema chains.

## METHODS

The method applied in this research is a qualitative method based on the film studies approach. The first step of performing film studies is to watch the film as the object for more than once. The first screening is meant to provide a general understanding of the film. The following screenings will focus on visual details of the film cinematography and mise-en-scene. Cinematography refers to the film camerawork, how it frames scenes to provide certain meanings and atmosphere for the audience. Mise-en-scene refers to all elements seen on the screen, for example, actors, costumes, sounds, setting, and props. The next step of the research is to interpret the visual data against the trauma theory, elaborate and conclude the findings, which are supported by relevant references.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This 10-minute film describes the mundane activity of a woman taking and picking up her daughter at school on a bicycle. The film opens with the daughter, in her house, looking at the sky and watching a rocket flies up, creating roaring sound. The scene is then transitioned to the woman taking her daughter to school on a bicycle. On a supposedly regular school day, the woman surprisingly finds that some gates at her housing complex are unusually closed, so she has to find another way out of the complex. When she picks

her daughter up, she passes some houses on which a sign saying 'owned by indigenous' is hanged. From afar, she can also see smoke rising from burnt buildings. At home, she attempts making a call to some numbers without any result. Then her daughter comes out to the front of their house, and from behind the closed gate of her house, she is watching the sky as a rocket passes by. The film ends with another child dressed in an astronaut suit walking around in an empty overgrown land surrounded by walls.

The fact that the film is produced seventeen years after the May 1998 tragedy suggests that the trauma is not healed. For a fact, there is almost no arrest of culprits that looted Chinese-Indonesians' stores during May 1998, as witnessed and experienced by some Chinese-Indonesians who suffered from looting. They even know some of the culprits as their own neighbors, yet to this day, they seem to have impunity and are never brought to justice. It is in line with what McGregor has said (2017) that impunity at its crux means that perpetrators of past human rights violations remain 'above the law'. The Chinese-Indonesians are reluctant to file a report for fearing repercussions. In the raping cases, some people still believe that the raping of Chinese-Indonesian women never happened due to a lack of report to the authority. This is contrary to the findings of the Women's Rights Commission that the raping indeed happens and the reason why the victims are not reporting because it is fear and trauma as the minority. Besides, the tradition within the Chinese-Indonesians that a rape victim becomes a disgrace for the family. There are also cases of threats and even assassination of an activist just a week before she is scheduled to testify in the United Nations.

The film does not explicitly re-enact the exact trauma that happens, but the trauma is built around the expression of the confused and innocence mother and daughter in facing the unknown and unfamiliar. The absence of actors makes the film more dramatic and traumatic as it strongly brings back the traumatic memory and horrors that Chinese-Indonesian women have to experience during that time, particularly related to the raping and killing incidents.

Two things that catch the audience's attention right away are that the film is mostly shot in black and white, and there is no dialogue throughout the film. The silence can be interpreted as a metaphor to the inability of Chinese-Indonesians to voice themselves as a minority, and the unspeakable and unsolved trauma they have experienced, in particular pertaining to the May 1998 tragedy. May 1998 is not the only time when Chinese-Indonesians become the victims of the national political unrest. Chinese-Indonesians have always been targeted as scapegoats during the Indonesian political turmoil.

Throughout the film, it can be only seen the expression of the mother and the daughter when facing the unknown and fear that disrupt their daily life, especially when the gates of their housing complex are closed (Figure 1), and when they see smoke billowing from some burnt buildings (Figure 2). The absence of dialogue adds to the anxiety and fear that the film generates through the expression of the characters, as Balazs in O'Rawe (2006) has stated that a silent glance can speak volumes. Its soundlessness makes it more expressive because the facial movements of a silent figure may explain the reason for the silence; make us feel its weight, its menace, its tension in the film, silence does not halt action even for an instant, and such silent action gives even silence a living face. Through the expression of the mother's anxiety and the daughter's innocence, the film manages to bring back the historical trauma of how

thousands of Chinese-Indonesian have experienced violent treatment, vilification, and the destruction of their business place.



Figure 1 A Closed Gate  
(Source: Iskandar, 2015)



Figure 2 Burnt Buildings  
(Source: Iskandar, 2015)

Besides being a mute film for the exception of sound effects, the film is mostly shot in black and white. Braga and Da Costa (2011) have said that the use of color in cinema involves associations at different level; (1) the physical, in the way color can affect the viewer giving him/her a more or less pleasing feeling; (2) the psychological, because color can stimulate psychological responses; and (3) the aesthetic, because color can be chosen selectively according to the effect they can produce, considering their balance, proportion, and composition within the film. Based on the psychology of color, black is often associated with grief, darkness, mystery, death, and mourning, while white is associated with love, protection, innocence, and death (in the eastern/Chinese culture). In the context of the film, the absence of other colors other than black and white may refer to the bleak situation for Chinese-Indonesians. Thus, the monochromatic look of the film suggests anxiety that causes fear and unhappiness to the innocence (mother and daughter) as well as the audience, in which the loving mother tries to protect her daughter from the uncertainty of the upcoming event. This interpretation is supported by Flückiger (2017), who has stated that aesthetic features of colors and their arrangement within a film's style are powerful instruments for connecting characters' moods and affective states to the audience's bodily reception. It also efficiently supports the overall atmosphere that death and grief are lurking and targeting the 'innocence'.

In cinematography context, there is an attempt to reduce spatiality through the choice of setting to evoke

a feeling of alienation in addition to the absence of other characters in the film. The mother and daughter are living in a house located in a crowded small complex in which the houses are built close to each other that they share outer walls. The road is small and can only fit one car to pass. The small and contained space evokes a feeling of suffocation and restriction, in addition to the absence of people that emphasizes their alienation.

The film only has three all-female characters, one of which appears in the last scene. There is another girl character who only appears briefly in the middle of the film, serves as a school friend of the major girl character. Visually, the actresses show prominent signifiers of being Chinese-Indonesians from their physical look (Figure 3), which carries stereotypical aspects of a Mongoloid race such as fair complexion, straight black hair, and slanted eyes.



Figure 3 Chinese-Indonesian Girl  
(Source: Iskandar, 2015)

The film opens with a shot of a mosque-motive carpet hanged upside down that is followed by an inter-title that says, "In May 1998, during two days of mass violence, rioters killed thousands of Indonesian-Chinese". It is followed by another inter-title that says, "They also raped and murdered women and students" (Figure 4).



Figure 4 The Opening Scene with an Inter-title  
(Source: Iskandar, 2015)

This camera stays in this position for about 26 seconds before it pans down right to capture a little girl who appears to be living in that house. In comparison to the short duration of the film, the 26 seconds of the static camera focusing on the same image can be considered long enough, which suggests an emphasis on the background event of the film. The audience is also given enough time to sit and remember about the incident while looking at the image. She stands behind bars of his house, looking upward (Figure 5).



Figure 5 The Girl Looking up to the Sky  
(Source: Iskandar, 2015)

This shot carries a sense of restriction with the girl as a representation of Chinese-Indonesians who are long to be free from certain limitations due to their different beliefs and ethnicity. The carpet that hanged outside the girl's house can also be interpreted as a symbol of difference and the limitation itself. In the context of Chinese-ness, the two shots suggest that being a Chinese means being restricted and limited. The juxtaposition of the first and second images also emphasizes the presence of a dichotomy view between 'we/they' or 'we/other', with 'we being the majority'.

The girl is watching a rocket soaring to the sky (Figure 6), and the two shots generate a contrasting image, an image of restriction and limitation versus an image of vastness and un-limitedness. The girl's action of always watching the sky strongly suggests the desire to be free from restriction and limitation that she has to face on a daily basis, especially during the May 1998 tragedy. Indeed, May 1998 is conceived as a moment that happened to be an unremitting reminder of Chinese-Indonesians' estrangedness (Thaniago, 2017). They respond, for example, by installing shops and houses with iron gates and higher fences, some even double as high, and some with spikes added on their tops (Thaniago, 2017) for their own protection, just like the film shows.



Figure 6 A Rocket Soaring to the Sky  
(Source: Iskandar, 2015)

To emphasize the restriction of movement, the film is deliberately shot in narrow alleys with houses stand close to each other that create a claustrophobic atmosphere (Figure 7 and 8). Besides, there are scenes when the mother on her bicycle has to find her way around to return to her house because the main gates are closed (Figure 9). Besides that, rows of the closed gate of the houses, as seen in Figure 7-9, also add to the feeling of restriction, indicating a sense of unwelcomeness.

To elevate the tension and eerie situation that reflects the May 1998 tragedy, the film intentionally provides visual

clues that isolate the two main characters even more. The clues are explicit signs that hang outside some houses that the two characters pass. The signs say “Pribumi Pro Reformasi” (Pro Reformation Indigenous) and “Milik Pribumi” (Belong to Indigenous), as seen in Figure 10 and 11.



Figure 7 Narrow Alleys and Houses Surround Them (Source: Iskandar, 2015)



Figure 8 Narrow Alleys (Source: Iskandar, 2015)



Figure 9 Another Closed Gate (Source: Iskandar, 2015)



Figure 10 A Sign Saying ‘Pro Reformation Indigenous’ (Source: Iskandar, 2015)



Figure 11 A Sign Saying ‘Belongs to Indigenous’ (Source: Iskandar, 2015)

The signs turn into an identity marker of the house owner that will prevent the house from being looted by the mobs who specifically target houses or business premises of Chinese-Indonesians. They also serve as a trauma reminder to Chinese-Indonesians that there is always a dichotomy of ‘us/them’ that alienates Chinese-Indonesians from the majority. There are actually other ethnicities living among indigenous people such as Indian or Arab descendants, but most of the time, the sentiment is aimed at the Chinese-descendants mostly due to the legacy of the ‘divide and rule’ policy of the Dutch that is still applied by the New Order regime for more than 30 years. In fact, as Purdey has argued as cited in Thaniago (2017), that anti-Chinese sentiment has been a social norm in Indonesia.

Setijadi (2017) has further added that the Dutch colonialists separate the Chinese-Indonesians as the ‘Foreign Orientals’ and place them as middlemen in trade dealings between the Dutch and the indigenous. This situation causes envy and sentiment towards the Chinese-Indonesians that is perpetuated during the assimilation period of the New Order regime. Thus, Chinese-descendants are singled out as ‘the other’, and thus never fully receive equal rights as Indonesian citizens compare to the indigenous people or other people from different cultural/ethnic background. During the New Order regime, Chinese-Indonesians are discouraged from entering politics; thus, they are confined in the economic sector. In fact, according to Setijadi (2017), the stereotypes of Chinese-Indonesians are still prevalent to this day, such as ‘Chinese-Indonesians as exclusive’.

The last-minute of the film is marked by a stark visual change when the film suddenly is shown in color. The jumpcut from the roaring rocket to a small creek flows between a wild grass field (Figure 12) provides a hint that the new scene occurs at a different time. The absence of natural elements in the previous black and white screen also becomes a contrast with the colored scene in which the film shows some natural elements such as water and grass field. The sound of flowing water provides a calming effect to the audience after the tension that occurred in the previous scenes. At the same time, the absence of humans in the colored scene still suggests loneliness and alienation.

The scene is followed by a wide shot of the same area that shows the vastness of the field (Figure 13). The openness of the scene is in contrast with the constrained space of the housing complex of the previous scenes. Then from the right side of the screen, enters a girl in a spacesuit (Figure 14), who examines her surroundings and obviously feels alienated as she obviously looks out of place with her spacesuit. The camera then zooms to the girl and shows her profile from her left side (Figure 15). The girl then takes off her helmet, looks around, smiles a bit, and the film ends.



Figure 12 A Small Creek  
(Source: Iskandar, 2015)

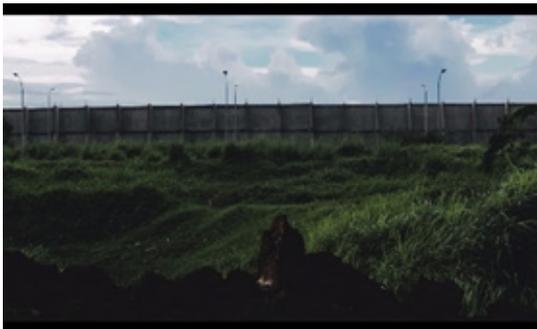


Figure 13 An Open Space  
(Source: Iskandar, 2015)



Figure 14 A Young Girl in a Space Suit  
(Source: Iskandar, 2015)

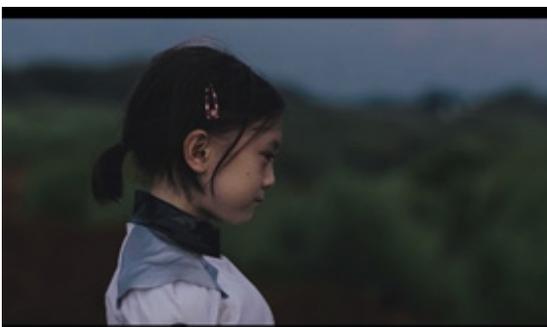


Figure 15 The Young Girl Smiles  
(Source: Iskandar, 2015)

The open space, as seen in Figure 14, shows three different layers; the ground, the wall, and the sky. For the

first time, the audience can see the open sky for a longer time, compares to the previous scenes when the sky is seen yet briefly. As the title suggests, the sky becomes an important part of the film. During the chaotic day when the sky 'is roaring', the girl in the first part of the film is imagining that she hears the rocket flying away to the sky. The sky clearly suggests freedom as the shot of the rocket is juxtaposed with the shot of the girl behind the fence of her house, clearly constraining her freedom. The second part of the film suggests the aftermath of the tragedy. The tone suggests calmness and serenity through the shots of natural elements and the sound of the flowing water.

The series of shots in the open grass field with the girl in the spacesuit may point to the visualization of the imagination of the girl in the previous scene that looks at the roaring rocket. From behind the iron fence of her house, she wishes that she can be freed from the constraint of her house and fly away to the vastness of space. In other words, the film's colored scenes become the analogy to the Chinese-Indonesians, who long for freedom from constraint and violence. However, those scenes can also be interpreted differently as the visualization of Chinese-Indonesians' future life. The blue and clear sky symbolizes the hope for Chinese-Indonesians, yet the vast empty grass field may suggest challenges that they have to face in the future. They have to start rebuilding their lives in an unwelcome and barren place. Besides, the tall wall may symbolize alienation and separation of the Chinese-Indonesians from the indigenous people. The wall represents the lives of many Chinese-Indonesians who live behind the tall wall of their houses. The young girl represents the future generation of Chinese-Indonesians, who may not personally experience such tragedy and who brings optimism for their future, as seen in her smile.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although the film ends in a hopeful tone, the film cinematography and mise-en-scene suggest that the life and future of Chinese-Indonesians may still face challenges that are rooted in Indonesian history. It is started with the divide and conquer policy of the Dutch colonizers. The film successfully brings back the traumatic memory of the May 1998 tragedy through the camerawork and mise-en-scene, as Caruth argues that trauma is strongly related to how certain images possess the victims. By bringing back certain images, the unreconciled trauma returns and haunts the victims. The bleak, black and white scenes that dominate the film manage to bring back the horror and tension experienced by Chinese-Indonesians. The film's strategy to use the characters of a mother and her daughter, who are trapped in the midst of chaos, brings up the tension even more. The absence of dialogue manages to help create a suspenseful atmosphere throughout the film. The confused, scared, and anxious mother fittingly pictures the overall emotion of Chinese-Indonesians who experienced the May 1998 tragedy.

The unreconciled tragedy of May 1998 becomes the reminder to the Chinese-Indonesians that their struggle to be accepted in the society without discrimination is not over yet. In fact, history has recorded that Chinese-Indonesians still often become the scapegoat, especially during Indonesian political dynamic when politicians use politics of identity to win people's vote, as what happened in the case of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or Ahok, who is slandered due to the fact

that he is a Chinese-Indonesian. The immature and close-minded mindset of some Indonesians is often exploited by politicians and radical religious groups to win people's favor. The film delivers a strong message that the absence of reconciliation to the tragedies that the Chinese-Indonesians experienced will cause them to always live under constant fear of violence and discrimination. It takes open-mindedness and the big-heartedness of the people as well as the government's willingness and strictness to uphold the laws so that all citizens have equal rights regardless of their cultural, ethnical, or religious background.

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