INTISARI


Kata-kata kunci: etnis Cina - diskriminasi - perspektif perbandingan

1 Fakultas Bahasa dan Sastra, Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Salatiga.
2 Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta.
INTRODUCTION

In the context of cultural studies, literature and social realities have direct relationship in the sense that literature, as a cultural product, is the symptom of an underlying socio-political configuration. Therefore, whether it is high literature or popular literature, both are equally accepted in cultural studies since they can reveal the various aspects of a nation (Culler 50 – 54).

The Chinese community and their experiences have been one aspect of social interrelationship in both America and Indonesia. Maxine Hong Kingston’s novel, China Men, which tells about Chinese immigrants and the discriminative treatments they received in America and Richard Oh’s novel, The Pathfinders of Love, which tells about the life of Chinese people and their problems, including the discriminative treatments they receive in Indonesia, were chosen as the object of investigation.

In fact, discriminative treatment of the Chinese ethnic both in America and in Indonesia is traceable from the history of Chinese migration from China, which took its great wave in the nineteenth century that witnessed the decline of the Qing dynasty. The century was colored with faltering administration, widespread corruption, degeneration of military, repeated humiliations at the hands of the western powers, the pressures of rising population, and the deterioration of the standard of living because of the free-trade, the rise of unemployment rate, the international migration of labor, annual natural calamities, and heavy tax for the peasants (Daniels, Asian America 12; Tong 19, 22 – 24; Chang 12 – 17). In the course of time migratory movements recurred and many of them came to live in countries with different social, cultural, and political background where discrimination often prevailed.

In the same way, Chinese ethnics and their descendants came to America and Indonesia and both countries responded to them. However, the kind of responses – one of which is discriminative treatment – depends on the socio-cultural and political conditions in each country.

This study is to see how the novels by Maxine Hong Kingston, China Men, and Richard Oh, The Pathfinders of Love expose the issue of discriminative treatment of the Chinese ethnics in America and Indonesia. It also aims to explore the social and cultural impacts of legalized discriminative treatments upon the ethnic Chinese as represented by the main characters of the novels.
ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Chinese ethnic in America are grouped on the basis of the three waves of arrivals in America. The first wave of immigrants were those known as the forty-niners, immigrants who shared the same interest in gold. The image of the Chinese in America at the time was "coolie" because most of them were willing to do hard jobs such as blasting the mountains in the Sierra Nevada Mountains during the building of the Transcontinental Railroad and all the menial jobs. The second wave of Chinese immigrants in the mid 20th century were those belonging to the movement known as "model minority," whose image was of a hard working person who asked for little and never complained. The third wave entered the United States during the last two decades of the twentieth century, consisting of Chinese of all socio-economic groups and backgrounds, including those who arrived as Sino-American relations and as the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Chang ix x x 38 47). Their arrival was firstly welcomed (Hirig 20), but as job competition became harsher, they had to suffer sentiments as manifestations of the American race-based stratification that only posed the Chinese ethnic as a minority. Sentiments against them arising from economic competition had made them subject to restriction, marginalization, and even exclusion. It was not until World War II when America proclaimed an alliance with China that the Chinese ethnic got friendly and better treatment and eventually fuller acceptance (Rose 60 61; McLemore 164 165).

The Chinese ethnic in Indonesia is grouped by the terms "peranakan" (descendants of inter-marriage between the Chinese, usually men, and the indigenous, usually women) and "totok" (descendants of the Chinese family or Chinese people who just arrived in the nineteenth century). The voluntary and sporadic coming of the Chinese as bachelors for trade and religious missions before the eighteenth century enabled them to marry local women and had children who made up the "peranakan" Chinese community (Setiono 19). They used to live peacefully and even intermixed socially and culturally. The Chinese immigrants who came to Indonesia in the nineteenth century, the time Indonesia was under the Dutch colonial rule, made "totok" Chinese group (Suryadinata, Dilema xix). Today, this group is declining in number, as new Chinese immigrants are getting fewer and some of their descendants married local people and have more "peranakan" children (Suryadinata, Negara 17). Something similar also happened in Indonesia. The religion- and race-based stratification introduced by the Dutch colonial rulers had posed the Chinese ethnic as a minority. They held a mid-position, i.e. between the Dutch society and the indigenous people. This means they were weak
politically but economically more advantageous which provoked sentiments that often led to riots. After independence, more law and regulations were issued to impose "assimilation." Yet, despite its good intention - to build national integration - they only pushed the Chinese ethnic into the far end of exclusiveness and "the otherness" which reached its peak in the May 1998 riots, victimizing many of the Chinese ethnic. Nevertheless, later development such as shown in the annulment of certain discriminative laws had proved the better position of the Chinese ethnic among the Indonesian mainstream.

In the world of literature, Maxine Hong Kingston, a Chinese-American, known firstly in 1980, brings up a new air in Chinese American literature since she tries to represent the new image of Chinese Americans from women's view point. Although her works were rejected strongly by some critics, including some Chinese American critics, she is one of the writers whose works attempt to "sort out what being a Chinese American means" and to "lay claim to America for American-born Chinese" (Kim 198 - 199; Feng http://www.cc.nctu.edu.tw/~pfeng/CALF/ch1.htm; May 7, 2004; 9:32). Her uniqueness in writing style and in portraying the Chinese community in literature has enabled other Chinese American writers such as Amy Tan to emerge with her luminous novels to represent the life of Chinese people (Van Spanckeren 109).

In Indonesia, Richard Oh, a Chinese descent writer, comes up with a contemporary image of the Chinese ethnic in Indonesia. Despite the English language he uses in writing his novels, openly describing the conflict that many people view as ethnic conflict between the Chinese and the native, he is one of the Sino Indonesian writers who initiate the "return" of the Sino Indonesian (the former Chinese-Malay) literature in Indonesia after a long void since 1960's.

China Men (1980) tells the story of Chinese immigrants and their descendants of the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Being written in postmodernist 'mixed-genre' tradition, it is in an "autobiographical form" although it does not specifically belong to autobiography as genre (Feng http://www.cc.nctu.edu.tw/~pfeng/CALF/ch1.htm; May 7, 2004; 9:32). Divided into eighteen chapters with six "thick" chapters and twelve "short" chapters, it uniquely tells the experiences that the Chinese characters encountered in their travels to America. The thick chapters tell the story of individuals representing different life periods of the Chinese immigrants and people of Chinese descent in America: beginning from the first immigrants coming in the mid-nineteenth century to the generation of the 1970's. The short chapters tell mostly parable-like or myth-like stories, which Kingston may remake to meet her purpose in her novel.
Additionally, these stories symbolize or prophecy what the "thick" chapters tell.

Each chapter and section of this book is a separate story with its own plot and different sets, but there is connection, the blood tie, to the main characters connects them. Therefore, the readers need not read the chapters in order. Interestingly, the ninth chapter presents a list of laws released by the American government in relation to the Chinese immigrants and people of Chinese descent in America. This list just adds to the image that the novel is a reflection of the true Chinese descent experiences.

The Pathfinders of Love is relatively simpler and shorter. The uncomplicated plot is progressively telling the story of a group of individuals: Sino-Indonesians, native Indonesians, Christians, Moslems, and an expatriate. The Pathfinders of Love has, as the setting, Jakarta "in the aftermath of May 1998 riot." The central theme is the questioning of the individual's existence as a person and as a member of society. Through its characters, the novel claims that differences would count as long as each person has conscience. In that way, they will be able to contribute to their society.

The novel also has a unique topic, i.e., subordination and discrimination against the Chinese ethnic in Indonesia. It is a topic that has never been openly written by any writer in Indonesia. The Pathfinders of Love seems to be an attempt to re-claim Indonesia, i.e., to define the place of the Chinese ethnic, as the author himself admits that it was written to challenge the condition that the author himself undergoes and faces as a Chinese descent (Oh, e-mail interview, July 12, 2005).

Besides the differences, those two novels in fact share the same concern: expressing the Chinese experience as immigrants and citizens of the countries which are racially foreign in origin. Both novels also carry a hope for people to have better understanding of the Chinese ethnic since both authors are "insiders" of the community although they do not historically represent it.

THE CHARACTERS

Oldest Chinese character in China Men is Bak Goong. The story about Bak Goong, who is the narrator's Great Grandfather, who went to Hawaii or the Sandalwood sugar plantation in the early nineteenth century, reveals the life of the Chinese in the nineteenth century. Life's difficulties in their home country, had made them leave it for better life in America due to the propaganda of the beautiful and rich American land. They were recruited by the crimp, an agent from the plantation (Kingston
92 – 94; Chang 30). The improper treatment had taken place since he was on the ship (Kingston 95) and continued on the land. Moreover, the Chinese were subordinate to the white community. The superior white employers did not only whip them to make them work faster, but also did not care about the workers’ health as shown by Bak Goong’s bad cough (Kingston 105). Bak Goong’s idea to challenge it never succeeded. In contrast to the Chinese, the white employers did not experience such difficulties although they were on the same land. They led and supervised the Chinese worker strictly. They, “in white suits, walked gingerly inspecting the char” (Kingston 105). As a real soujourner, Bak Goong eventually returned to China, leaving all the sufferings he endured in Hawaii (Kingston 119).

There is no mention of the particular law being imposed in the story, but discriminative treatment is evident as compared to Bak Goong’s fellow white workers. Bak Goong has given the image of the Chinese as a persevering, enduring, hard-working and self-reliant individual.

The other character who went to America in the nineteenth century is Ah Goong, the grandfather of the narrator. He arrived in America to become a railroad worker in the spring at the work of the Transcontinental Railroad had began in January 1863 (Kingston 128). Ah Goong represents the first generation of the Chinese who were known as “coolie”, who worked on the railroad, taking the worst position for low wages (Kingston 128). Despite the fact that they were hard-working laborers, the whites were not satisfied and wanted them to work faster and faster (Kingston 134).

Ah Goong’s purchasing a paper of citizenship from a man who called himself a Citizenship Judge with a bag of gold dust during the time of strike (Kingston 141) reveals that the life of Chinese immigrants in America in that period was so insecure that it made them do anything to get protection (Daniels 35; Chang 42 – 51). However, the instability of the American immigration regulation is also revealed. It was found later that the paper was fake and was crossed out when the third main character, Bella, used it to prove that his grandfather was a legal American in the examination at the Immigration Office when he entered the United States (Kingston 61). Ah Goong went back and forth China – America three times and experienced as well as witnessed the Chinese sentiment and the enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was called as the Driving Out period (Kingston 147 – 148). Luckily, he was always safe.

Ah Goong’s story reveals the suffering of the Chinese immigrants in
the nineteenth century during the gold mining and railroad building. Ah Goong’s experience in the railroad building also displays how the superior white employers exploited the Chinese workers as their subordinates, not only in social life, but also in terms of legal papers. Besides, his efforts to survive, shows one important value: self-reliance.

The story about Baba’s three possible ways of entrance to the United States, as the narrator imagined, shows how the implication of the legal products had not hindered the Chinese immigration. The first version was Baba’s legal entrance that required examination, including physical and literacy tests, legal papers check-over, and interviews (Kingston 48, 55 - 57, 60 - 61, 145). The second possible entrance into the country was through a legal ship voyage from Cuba to New York. This way did not put him into better condition because he had to roll cigarettes and cigars to earn money on dock (Kingston 50). The job had in fact degraded his strata in China into the lowest. The third version of the father’s entrance to the United States is the illegal entrance: trafficking.

Entering the United States, Baba and three of his friends, ran a laundry business to make a living. He dressed himself European style (Kingston 65). Furthermore, he and his family later did not really bother about holding a complete traditional Chinese funeral when one of the narrator’s Great Grandfathers died (Kingston 185 - 186). He had to work hard as a laundryman, a typically Chinese field of work in America, as he and his two friends opened a laundry business in New York. Then, although being cheated by his friends, he kept working, so eventually he could afford a rundown house for his family (Kingston 248).

Baba or Ed’s wife, a minor character in the novel, tells the Chinese women’s experience. She shared the same difficulties with her husband when she entered the United States, she was encountered by the Page Law forbidding Chinese prostitutes. That thwarted the entrance of the Chinese women in general (Hsing 23). She managed to join her husband by preparing herself to be a scholar - a qualification needed for entrance - that she was admitted although only on a temporary basis. She got her degree from a scientific school ran by white people before entering the United States (Kingston 69). This woman, who the narrator calls MaMa, often complained of the miserable life she had in America because she was enslaved by a family of rich Chinese merchant to repay the money they lent to pay for their housing. This event only emphasizes the reason why the Chinese left China: to find better life.

The story of Baba, who was also called Ed, and MaMa reveals that the life of Chinese immigrants in early twentieth century was not easier
than that of those in the nineteenth century. Even though both of them were educated, they must suffer to live as domestic workers because of the discriminative laws. They remained subordinate to the white society and furthermore, some of them had let themselves degrade in status and had faced the fact that those of lower status in China might become their superior in America. However, their stubbornness to keep living in America proves that they actually had self-reliance through their persistence.

The fourth main character is the narrator’s youngest brother who was enlisted himself in the Navy to be sent to Vietnam. This character lived relatively better than the other characters because he had been admitted as an American citizen. His era has noted more lenient laws (Kingston 157 - 158). Yet, this brother remained to be a subordinate, although in character it was more social than legal. He was educated and became a teacher before he joined the military. Being the second generation of the Chinese American and having been accepted as an American citizen was not a guarantee to live equally with the superior white dominance. The brother’s era witness the dominant ethnic group’s prejudice and anxiety toward the Chinese due to their opposition to the communist ideology which always connote with China. Thus, their cautiousness toward the Chinese American just delayed their acceptance of this subordinate group. This brother’s concern about the negative effect of war seemed to be strengthened with his experience in the Navy as he found that the war had brought Chinese deserts to fight against each other (Kingston 292 - 293). As a loyal veteran, he was eventually granted personnel papers from his Commanding Officer, stating that he was a “Communication Specialist” and got “Q Clearance” (Kingston 291). Furthermore, the family was guaranteed safety from their surrounding during the investigation (Kingston 292).

This brother resembles the second generation of Chinese American citizen, who despite the fact that they had more opportunities such as getting education and work outside the stereotyped fields, they remained subordinates. This brother’s keenness in learning and doing his job proves his persistence and his hard working characteristic as a part of his self-reliance.

The Pathfinders of Love (1999) tells about the life of several Chinese persons who try to “improve the bad image” the Chinese are always connote with. Although telling the story simply progressively, it holds its uniqueness that lies on its topic, i.e. subordination and discrimination against the Chinese ethnic in Indonesia. Yet, these were not explicitly narrated in the novel.
The oldest Chinese descent character, MayLin’s maternal Grandmother may generally indicate that some of the people of Chinese descent are considerate towards their surrounding, as she shows disagreement and opposition to the “silly” and “inappropriate” glamarous Moon Festival celebration party held by her daughter’s family (Oh 33). The lack of personal information on MayLin’s Grandmother is due to her being a minor character, but being elaborated, it may symbolize the uncleaness of when Chinese people first arrived in Java in particular, and in Indonesia in general. The story does not give information about the ancestral history of the Chinese Indonesians because in fact it is really unclear when the Chinese people had their first contact with Indonesians. Some assumptions have been proposed as some archaeological investigation show possible contacts as early as the first to the sixth century B.C. (Setiono 17 – 18).

LeeAng, a younger Chinese character, who kept his Chinese name, was a man with sense of fairness and kind-heartedness although his job and success was stereotypical Chinese descents in Indonesia. LeeAng’s financial condition is an obvious portrait of successful Chinese descent business people in Indonesia.

LeeAng’s awareness of the Chinese stereotype as having built his wealth “at the expense of the lost opportunities of the pribumi, the indigenous (28), made him respond his people’s exposure of good deed until the people were ready to see their “sincerest gesture of good intentions” (Oh 177). It means that it takes time to “reconcile” the gap between the indigenous and the Chinese ethnic due to the implementation of the governmental policies for hundreds of years.

LeeAng’s experience of being suspected and accused is exactly what most Chinese Indonesians experience. They were subordinates just because they were Chinese. LeeAng’s comment about “the mealy-mouthed politicians who will always be cunning, be skewering things and besmitch whatever we try to accomplish, just to stir the pot” (Oh 177) may indicate that the Chinese people’s subordination was not only the fault of the indigenous people, but it was also the result of some political interests. It also reflects that some people of Chinese descent may realize the exact condition of the ethnic relation in Indonesia. It also shows why the Chinese were disinterested in political matters that may become the source of their bitterness.

LeeAng is the image of the Chinese who bear the impact of discriminative legal products, but try to prove that they are just like the other human beings with their conscience and empathy to their surroundings.
His successful business shows that he was a typical Chinese descent whose "expertise" was "business" or economy as the impact of the Dutch colonial rule's ethical policy (Lohanda 43) and of Peraturan Pemerintah (Governmental Regulation) No. 10 released in November 1959 (Aly 40 - 44; Setiono 791-795).

Lee Ang's devotion to the Chinese tradition shown through his family's private celebration Moon Festival reveals how the Chinese underwent discrimination (Ch 31) through the instruksi Presiden No. 114 tahun 1967 (Presidential Directive) on the Chinese religions, beliefs, and customs of December 6, 1967 (Wibowo 105). The game of matchmaking (Ch 32) also indicates the Chinese exclusiveness that would not acknowledge mixed marriage.

May Lin, Lee Ang's daughter, was sincere and sensitive to the society. Being the second generation of Chinese descent, she attempted to show her conscience to people around her by actively being involved and becoming the motivator of a non-profit organization called the Association for Women Against Rape or known as AWARE (Ch 10). Her Chinese name was not an obstacle to her dominant contribution of giving moral support to the woman victims of the riots. May Lin is a Chinese image whose concern for the society does not fit into the stereotype attributed to them as always hiding behind their business and financial security, but she obviously represents Chinese people who attempt to blend into the society where they live in. Her wearing Silk Kebaya and bundling her hair up into a bun (Ch 166) is an obvious attempt to assimilate with the local culture and it does abide by the government's integration policy for the Chinese descent (Suryadinata Emis 78).

However, she remained a woman of Chinese descent who appreciates her ancestors' tradition as it is shown by her positive remark towards the Moon festival, which may indicate that the idea of assimilation policy (Suryadinata Emis 156 - 157) is an impossible thing to do.

The other Chinese descent character is Rosa, who wears an Indonesian name, represents many Chinese Indonesians, especially those in Java. The name mirrors how the Chinese people responded to Kepuhasan Presidium Cabinet No. 127/12/Kep/12/1966 (Decree of the Cabinet Presidium) for the Chinese to use of "Indonesian" names (Suryadinata Emis 85). The house tells that Rosa and her family lived a rather secluded life which may represent the long time impact of the Dutch colonial's residence system (mixkestitel) (Lohanda 37 - 38; Setiono 81, 129), which enhanced the exclusiveness of the Chinese.

Besides revealing how the Chinese underwent discrimination, the
coming out of Instruksi Presiden No. 114 tahun 1967 (Presidential Directive) on Chinese religions, beliefs, and customs of December 6, 1967, Rosa’s devotion as a Christian (Oh 31) indicates her blend with non-Chinese life style as a part of the Chinese interrelationship with their environment for a long time (Oh 49).

The May 1998 riot turned up to excessive cruel torture upon the people of Chinese descent, especially females, as represented by the novel’s minor character, LeeChin (Oh 72 – 73).

The last but not the least character is Jailudin, a native born, whose presence essentially emphasizes the image that “Chinese-ness” was bad. It is a life-long bias of the belief that Chinese were omens of bad luck. He was tortured due to his connection with MayLinn’s activities (Oh 103 – 105; Setzono 174 – 177).

CONCLUSION

The study proves that the two novels reflect how the Chinese in America and Indonesia underwent discriminatory treatments because of the government’s policies applied specifically for them. Besides, each work reflects its authors’ attempt to voice the experiences of the Chinese and their descendants who claimed to be part of the countries where they live and exist. Both novels have also revealed the better picture of the Chinese ethnic stereotype showing self-reliance as one of the most significant values of their traits. Furthermore, their works have added to the two countries’ literary richness because as reflections and responses to life, they should be viewed and appreciated as they are. Therefore, such Sino-Indonesian writer as Richard Oh is an essential “asset” to Indonesian literature in particular and world literature as well.

Thus, there is nothing worth comparing to the enhancement of a harmonious life among human beings through understanding. Therefore, it is important to promote enjoyment of the study of culture through, among others, the study of literature.

The writer of this study owes great gratitude to her friends of Chinese descent and Chinese-like mother, as their experiences have tickled her for more than a decade to think the problem over and have made this study come off.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


