

Indonesian female directors focus on Chinese

By Yenni Kwok



Still from the Photograph. Photo: Nan Achnas/Salto Films

In Indonesia, where ethnic and religious relations can be contentious, *The Photograph* is a breath of fresh air. The film, directed by Nan Achnas, depicts the tender friendship between Johan, an elderly itinerant photographer of Chinese descent, and Sita, a Javanese prostitute trying to escape from her abusive pimp.

“Being brought up in Singapore and Malaysia, I was always surrounded by the many cultures in these countries – the Chinese, Indian and Malay,” says the 44-year-old Indonesian director. “The relationship between Johan and Sita is based on mutual trust and need. I deliberately tried to show their respect for each other's beliefs. I wanted to show the colour blindness of the two cultures.”

The Photograph, released in Indonesia in July, represents a phenomenon in Indonesian cinema that has emerged since the fall of authoritarian president

Suharto in 1998. Reflecting the growing acceptance of Chinese culture, a series of films exploring Chinese themes and characters have been made in recent years. More significantly, they were made by non-Chinese women.

Ca Bau Kan (The Courtesan), the debut work of director Nia Dinata, was the first to break such ground when it was released in 2002. Based on a best-selling novel, the period drama revolves around a romance between a Chinese merchant and his Javanese lover during the first half of the 20th century.

The Chinese protagonist is an ambiguous character. He's true to his love, but he's also a scoundrel who's ruthless and scheming in dealing with rivals. But *Ca Bau Kan* was a big step forward, especially when compared with the negative, caricatured portrayal of the Chinese during Suharto's so-called New Order era.

“Ethnic Chinese were largely absent from Indonesian films, except in very peripheral and stereotyped roles - and even those were few and far between,” says Australia-based academic Krishna Sen, who writes extensively about Indonesian media.

Last year, Nia directed *Love for Share*, which looks at the controversial issue of polygamous marriage in three homes. Two storylines are set in Muslim households, but the third takes place in a Chinese setting. “Indonesia is a pluralistic country, but its cinema doesn't show it very much,” the 37-year-old filmmaker says. “I'm interested in depicting the various ethnicities and also realities here.”

After producing surprising smash hits, producer-director Mira Lesmana realised her long-time dream of making a movie about her hero in 2005. *Gie* is a biopic about Soe Hok Gie, a male student activist of the 1960s whose published diary captivated Mira after she completed high school.

“It was kind of a bible for me, accompanying me in my adulthood,” the 43-year-old says. “He was my hero – a true idealist. He was marginalised because of his Chinese descent, but I thought he was a true Indonesian, a true nationalist. Most importantly, his honesty is truly inspiring.”

Like Soe, whose contribution was nearly forgotten, few people remember that ethnic Chinese were pioneers in the nascent stage of Indonesia's movie

industry. Chinese producers and directors – both the locally born and recent migrants from China, including Shanghai – made most of the films in the late 1920s and throughout the 30s. Sen says that as many as half of the 40 or so films made in the 1930s Dutch East Indies were set within the Chinese-Indonesian community.

A handful of Chinese filmmakers still shot films after Indonesia became independent in 1945, but they virtually disappeared after Suharto took power in 1966. Only one director, known by his Indonesian name Teguh Karya, was definitely of Chinese descent. Teguh, who died in 2001 at the age of 64, was the master of Indonesia cinema, winning scores of awards. But he hardly discussed his Chinese ancestry and never made a film with Chinese themes.

Women filmmakers used to be even rarer. “Only three women had worked as directors between the production of the first film in Indonesia in 1926 and the end of the New Order in 1998,” Sen says. They produced only half a dozen or so films that, at best, can be described as mediocre.

But along with a new generation of filmmakers who emerged after 1998, female directors and producers – such as Nan, Mira and Nia – entered the scene, making movies that are critically and popularly acclaimed.

Nan thinks there's a reason women are interested in making films about ethnic Chinese. “Being part of a minority in a patriarchal society like Indonesia, women have a sensitivity towards other forms of minorities,” says the director, whose film also had female producers. “I suppose it's a form of identification, a kindred spirit, an attraction of similar conditions.”

Mira agrees. “We're more sensitive to issues such as discrimination, perhaps because we have been discriminated against for a long time,” says Mira, who worked with male director Riri Riza to shoot *Gie*. “It's liberating to be able to touch this issue.”

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