The Search for Oral Narratives of the Chinese Community in Semarang

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Abstract

Oral narratives are considered for their being out-dated, excessively glorifying and exposing the romantic past and therefore useless. Yet, it is almost forgotten that in connection with the sustainability of Indonesia as a nation there are many basic things needs preserving and developing. One of them is about the national consensus on racial and ethnical heterogeneity. The study on the Chinese community in 'Pecinan' (Chinatown) that was conducted several years ago interestingly resulted in some "facts" about Chinese culture that had been 'silenced' during the New Order regime. Regarding the fact, it is quite interesting to find out oral narratives in the community. This article is concerned with the existence of oral narratives and how they are appreciated.

Keywords: *oral narratives, ethnicity, race, cultural diffusion, pluralism*

Introduction

Lots of cultural studies point out that oral communication has become the most important means of cultural transformation. Alphabet, ideogram and other modern means of communication cannot essentially change oral communication since they are merely the alternative means of communication. They all give their weight on the importance of oral interaction as the primary means of communication (Goody in Richard Bauman, 1992: 12). Oral narratives basically deal with myths, legends, and tales.

Nowadays, it is impossible not to say that Indonesians tend to leave and put aside oral narratives. Most of them think that such 'heritage' is impractical and meaningless to national development in many aspects of life. Yet, it is almost forgotten that in connection with the sustainability of Indonesia as a nation there are many basic things needs preserving and developing. One of them is about the national consensus on racial and ethnical heterogeneity.

This article is based on the results of field research conducted by a team from Centre for Urban Studies Soegijapranata Catholic University on The Tradition of Oral Narratives of Chinese Community in Semarang, Indonesia. This article comprises two main sections: first is Oral Narratives in Semarang's Chinatown and second is Oral Narratives and Appreciation of Pluralism.

Oral Narratives in Semarang's Chinatown

"When and how did oral narratives start to exit in Semarang's Chinatown?" This question undoubtedly leads the reader to trace back the existence of Chinese community in Semarang. From the interviews with the sources, the team found out 26 (twenty six) stories. These stories could be categorised: 20 (twenty) legends, 4 (four) myths and 2 (two) tall tales (tales of lying). The 20 (twenty) legends consist of 14 (fourteen) individual legends, 3 (three) religious legends, and 3 (three) supernatural legends. Of the 26 (twenty-six) stories 5 (five) are of local while the rest is mainly migratory. Yet, only one story is relatively intact based

on Axel Olrik's super organic law (Dananjaya, 1997: 25). From the interviewees, they did not precisely know when and how oral narratives exactly appeared in the community. Nevertheless, they indicated that since the early coming of Chinese to the archipelago (Nusantara or Indonesia) in 7th A.D. and the waves of migration during Dutch Colonial times (c.a.18th – 19th), oral narratives had also been 'brought'.

In addition, Kwa Tong Hay, one of the interviewees, stated that oral narratives started to develop when Admiral Zheng He of the Ming Dynasty arrived in a place, which is now Semarang. Interestingly, his statement goes in accordance with the statement of a former Singaporean Ambassador in Indonesia, Lee Khoon Choy, mentioning as follows:

> *It was told in my family for generations that the besides bringing enormous wealth and crew, great voyages of Zheng He also brought along with them tales which were told to the indigenous. As a matter of fact the crew was from many different places. Some of them only passed by, some others made contact with the indigenous and settled down here. They all told their tales to the indigenous and vice versa* (Khoon Choy, 1976: 32).

From the statements above, it can be deduced that the arrival of Admiral Zheng He induced the growth of oral narratives in Semarang. Yet, it cannot be taken for granted as it may neglect a possibility that Chinese communities that had settled down earlier in towns of Juwana, Lasem, and Tuban than in Semarang, and that had even come before Zheng He's visits to Java (Setiono, 2002), might have spread out tales, legends, and myths to the indigenous. Nevertheless, such possibility needs further researching.

Meanwhile, another interviewee, Gan Kok Hwie saw the development of oral narratives in Semarang as to be coherent with the history of Chinese community in the city as mentioned bellow:

> *There have been a lot of 'stories' in our community since the days we lived in Semarang. A very long time ago we lived in Simongan. Then by the Dutch Colonial, we were replaced to the nowadays Chinatown. As more people came and the community became more crowded, more 'stories' also spread out. Sio Hok Bio temple was established in 1753. Prior to the establishment of the temple, there was a pond or 'blumbang' (in Javanese translation) behind it. At that time, the condition of the pond was still natural with its huge size, its fresh water surrounded by big trees as well as bushes. Chinese people, mainly peasants, who arrived afterward lived nearby the pond and built a shrine for Kwan Im Ting. Kwan Im Ting was a shrine for Goddess Kwan Im Hudco. At that time, only on the first and the fifteenth days that people came to pay homage. And it was conducted during daytime, as people were afraid of big trees and the stillness pervading the place at night. Moreover, there were no electrified lights as we have now. What they had were merely candles. As the density of the population increased, people were no longer afraid of coming to the shrine to pay homage as often as they wanted even at night time. Then, people started to open small business there such as selling foods and drinks. Not only were Chinese's sellers there but also Javanese's. During the time, there were many tales of which the most popular was that connected with the pond. It was about a mythical turtle of the pond whose apparition would bring good fortune for those who happen to see it. Ever since, the shrine became more and more mythically significant.*

There are two important things that can be drawn from the quote; first is about Simongan and second is about Kwan Im Ting. Simongan is believed to be birthplace of the Chinese community in Semarang. Nowadays, it is situated in the western part of Semarang City separated by western canal locally known as 'Kaligarang'. Here is the area on which 'Sam Poo Kong' or to the locals known as 'Gedong Batu', the famous temple to commemorate Admiral Zheng He, was built. The fact that Simongan is considered as the birthplace of the early Chinese community in Semarang can also be found in some sources (Thian Joe, 1933).

The existence of Kwan Im Ting as described above seems to have given effect on the development of 'Cap Kauw King', a name for 19 small houses in Chinese-Hokkien dialect. It can be seen from the condition and the density of the area and from the tale of mythical turtle. About the mythical turtle, it is quite possible that such a tale might have been 'created' on purpose to economically serve the benefits of either Chinese or Javanese sellers in the area. Yet, regardless such possibility, Thompson (1955) mentions that the fact about a turtle as one of the mythical animals for Chinese is undeniable.

Unlike the previous interviewees, Thio Tiong Gie tried to see the Admiral Zheng He's expedition to Java as a consequence of his duty to the imperial (Ming Dynasty). He thought that the imperial duty served both political and economical interests of the Ming Dynasty. He also underscored the idea that such duty did not give any cultural implication to both Chinese and the visited areas, particularly in spreading out oral narratives from and to China as revealed in the interview below.

> *Zheng He is a Mandarin, but in Hokkien is The Ho.*
> *So, we have Sam Poo Kong in Semarang….*
> *Yes…*
> *Are there any tales or legends about Sam Poo Kong or Zheng He?*
> *No, there is no story about it. Zheng He only gave us the temple as his mark in Semarang. But there is a story in Cirebon. Long ago, there lived Haji Tan Eng Kwan, a Chinese merchant, whose daughter was proposed by Sunan Gunung Jati, the Sultan of Cirebon. Ever since, there was a story of Chinese Lady of Gunung Jati in Cirebon.*
> *Yet, is there any story of Zheng He himself in Indonesia?*
> *To the best of my knowledge, there is none. He came here only to execute Chinese imperial foreign policy. However, we must know about his expeditions. After visiting Cirebon, Zheng He continued his expedition with a short stop in Semarang. He landed in an area known as Gedong Batu now. It was still a coast at that time. He anchored there and climbed a hill to observe the weather and direction before continuing the expedition to Madura. When he was observing, it rained very hard. So, he went down the hill in a hurry. While going down, he found a cave. Then, he decided to stay there off the rain. That is why Zheng He left no story in Semarang but a place where he was once there. Therefore, the hill where he climbed on and stood up on was named Sam Po Tun. And the cave where he took shelter from the rain was named Sam Po Tong. Then, it became a belief by the locals so as more people came to consider the place sacred and built a shrine to pay homage for Zheng He. Afterwards, a 'kongco'[1] was brought from China and was placed there. The Kongco was then added with an inscription of Chinese letter 'Ching'. The letters implies that one bearing it has an extraordinary quality. It is beyond human ability. That is why the idol in the temple is named Sam Po 'Ching' Tong. So, herein there is no history about Zheng He, but a commemorating temple. Yet, there are in Cirebon and Surabaya.*

From the quote above, there are two things that need to be underscored. First is the identification of oral narratives as 'history' or as at least having connection with history. It can be seen in the case of 'Chinese Lady of Gunung Jati' of Cirebon. Second is the idea that Zheng He's expedition does not leave any 'stories' about him in Semarang except diplomatic mission and commerce (read also Stuart-Fox, 2003: 86-87 and Khoon Choy, 1976: 94)[2]. The absence of 'history' and 'oral narratives' becomes quite interesting to analyse for what Thio Tiong Gie narrated is, in fact, a legend of a historical figure. Disregard the possibility that Zheng He eventually once 'climbed up' the hill and took 'shelter' from the rain in the cave, which can be the indicator of Neo Euhemerism (Dananjaya, 1997: 60), it implies that the fame of Zheng He could be the source of his legend passed down from generation to generation in the community. In addition, Zheng He's expeditions once became of the inspiration of a 'novel' containing fantasy of supernatural stories of the formidable Zheng He (Khoon Choy, 1976:90).

Oral Narratives and Appreciation of Pluralism

This part of the article is meant to show how far oral narratives of Chinese origin are welcomed by the Javanese and to what extent the Javanese take part in developing them. In this respect, Kwa Tong Hay pointed out that there are similar themes of some Chinese and Javanese stories. As a case in point, a legend of a Goddess descends to earth and then marries a man as known in Chinese's classical legend 'The Seventh Goddess' and in the legend of Peacock Lady 'Rona' in Yunnan Province could also be found in the Javanese's 'Joko Tarub'. Nevertheless, Kwa Tong Hay doubted how the similarity might occur. Then, he gave an assumption that it may occur by the time Admiral Zheng He arrived in Java wherein his crew and the indigenous exchanged 'stories'. Yet, no single Javanese is sure when the legend of Joko Tarub exactly appeared for the first time.

Kwa Tong Hay's ideas may imply two things. On the one hand, he has mentioned the concept of cultural diffusion (Dananjaya, 1997: 56); whether or not he realises it. On the other hand, his notion indicates uncertainty of some following questions: was it Chinese who influenced Javanese? Or the other way round? Or both of them influenced each other? Such questions may lead to the possibility of acculturation (read also Koentjaraningrat, 1990 and Hariyono, 1994).

About the acceptance of Chinese's oral narratives by Javanese can be seen in the impact of Chinese kungfu stories to the Javanese. Kwa Tong Hay mentioned that those stories are deeply rooted in both Chinese history and oral narratives such as legends, and folktales (read also Suryadinata, 2002: 207-208). The acceptance of the indigenous Javanese towards those stories can be drawn from Tong Hay's statement below:

> *I think Chinese and Javanese influenced each other. It can be simply pointed out that in mid-60s stories such as Condor Heroes, which was then filmed, were tremendously popular here. Then, Herman Pratikto, a writer from Yogyakarta, wrote a local epic entitled 'Bende Mataram' on the basis of Condor Heroes. So, he basically imitated Condor Hero and brought the composition into indigenous context with its history to make it more familiarised. Though he imitated Condor Hero, he did it very cleverly and smoothly. This is because he really was a smart and creative writer. Just for example, he changed Mongolian troops of Yuan Dynasty into the Colonial Dutch troops. He also transfigured a Mongolian Lady named 'Go Cin' into a daughter of Dutch Major, 'Sonni de Hoop'. Another writer who did the same thing, as Herman Pratikto was the late Widi Widayat. Yet, in comparison to the latter's work, the formers was far more sophisticated, smooth and engrossing. The later tended to combine his work not only from Condor Heroes but also from other stories. It resulted in the atmosphere of his work as being technically speaking, incoherent. However, we have to admit that the birth of Indonesian 'kungfu' stories is from such endeavours. Herman Pratikto, Widi Widayat and then S.H. Mintardjo who really composed by himself Legends of Javanese Lands such as the Legend of Magelang, the Legend of Menoreh and many more started it. Although there might have been some sort of influence from Chinese legends and tales, Mintardjo's works were, technically speaking, typically Javanese by plot and characterisation. And that is great! It was such a positive influence. Before the time, I hardly found any Javanese 'kungfu' stories. When I was a little boy, there weren't such stories. Such stories started to exist when I was in senior high school even. What I had in my childhood was Tales of 'Warok'.[3] But Warok is not a 'kungfu' story I suppose.*

From the long quote above, it can be indicated that the acceptance of Chinese stories lies not only on the process of imitating, modifying, and transforming any Chinese's elements to those of Javanese culture and history, but also and more importantly on how they inspired indigenous writers to develop stories of their own. Being inspired in this case may mean that Chinese stories could be very much interesting from their plots, characterisation, or themes to be

imitated and be model or standard to make Javanese stories. It really was such an appreciating endeavour to support.

Likely, Gan Kok Hwie implied that indigenous appreciation towards Chinese oral narratives lies in their enthusiasm to read those stories. He even gave a conviction on the matter as what he himself experienced in the mid-60s. At the times, there were a great number of readers of all strata, age, ethnics who were fond of kungfu stories. He himself saw it when he was in a train to deliver a package of translated kungfu serials books from Semarang to Jakarta. He observed many people spent their time reading Kungfu stories in the train. Such a situation can also be seen in some other references (read Setiono, 2002:381-421 and also Suryadinata, 2002: 212-228).

Furthermore, he also stated that the manifestation of cultural appreciation between Javanese and Chinese does not only reside in how Javanese loves Chinese kungfu stories and even modifies them as their own, but also in how Chinese appreciates 'authentic' Javanese tales and legends as depicted below.

> *Are parents of Chinese families in Semarang used to telling Chinese tales or stories to their children?*
> *No, they are not. Not now. But in the past, parents or grandparents used to tell stories to their children, for example Tales of the Three Kingdoms or 'Sam Kok' and legend of the mighty monkey 'Sun Go Kong'. Children loved them very much. The elderly indeed liked to tell stories to children. Due to the fact that they lived in Indonesia, it was not only Chinese stories being told but also those of Indonesian, especially of Javanese such as 'Kancil Nyolong Timun' or 'Anglingdarma'.*

From the quote above, it is interesting to know their very reason. On the basis of "living in Indonesia', Indonesian and Javanese tales have also been introduced in Chinese families by means of storytelling. Though such a situation mostly occurred in the past, it may justify that the existence of cultural tolerance between Chinese and Javanese through their oral narratives has taken place for centuries. With taking no attention to a possibility that such a condition might have resulted from any 'external force' or their 'unwillingness', making use of oral narratives from one ethnic group can be a medium to introduce the beauty of cultural diversity to other ethnic groups. If it is introduced to children as a part of their bedtime stories, it will be very advantageous to minimise any potential of racial conflicts as they grow up. Imparting them with cultural awareness and familiarising them with notion that pluralism and diversity are ordinary things can be an extraordinary 'investment' since there lays togetherness, warmth and harmony between two individuals or more. There also lies critical thinking, moral messages and appreciation at the same time.

The condition above is not to be seen as a utopia though the fact indicates that it really is facing great obstacles. Taking into account of the results of Berkowitz's research, there are some factors of which mostly are external that make youngsters dislike oral narratives by means of storytelling. They are television, education, new religion and domestic economy. The accumulation of those factors results in the perception that oral narratives are outdated and paying attention to them is a real waste of time. This alienation to tradition is due to the absence of parental role and authority. For the sake of fulfilling economic needs, parents often work overtime outside the house, and it makes them think there is no need to carry out tradition ((Berkowitz, 1975: 29-30). It is a critical moment and it does need an attention and actions before turning to an irony. The only way to preserve oral narratives from extinction is by introducing them through Cenggi.[4]

Meanwhile, Thio Tiong Gie saw that stories in Po Te Hie (classical Chinese puppet) still do get appreciation from the Javanese audience in Semarang. He further compares what happens in Semarang to that in Yogyakarta where stories of Po Te Hie have been well tailored and then staged by a Ketoprak (read Bandem, 1996: 26) group called Cokrojiyo.

> *One of the stories in Po Te Hie that is Ji Ze Jing Chung Kwee was translated and*

> *adapted by Cokrojiyo. It can be seen from some modification, for example: Kingdom of Tay Tong Tia with its triple "t" becomes Tanjung Anom; King Li Sen Bin becomes Prabu Lisanpura; General Che Jun Kwee or Sin Jin Kui becomes ManggoloYudho Joko Sudiro; Royal Prince Djia Tao Kin becomes Pangeran Dono Wilopo; Captain Jun Han, who could fly, becomes Cahyono while Captain Tok It Ho, who could make way into the earth, becomes Tausidono. I have personally checked it.*

Fact that Cokrojiyo often performs with the Javanised Chinese epics and sagas could also be found in another research. In the research, it is also mentioned the process of acculturation of Chinese and Javanese resulting in two kinds of puppets, namely: Po Te Hie and Sino-Javanese Shadow Puppet created by Gan Thwan Sing (Mastuti, 2004).

Besides making the stories Javanised and being an attentive audience, Thio Tiong Gie thought that another appreciation of the indigenous to Po Te Hie could be seen in their involvement as the musical crew in the performance. He even pointed out that the puppet makers are of Javanese. Thus, such relationship induces a sort of dependence between Chinese and Javanese. One may not smoothly work without the other. In addition, he mentioned that prior to Presidential Instruction no 14/1967; the government did officially acknowledge Po Te Hie as part of Indonesian culture. It proves that Thio Tiong Gie was once appointed by the Office of Ministry of Education and Culture in Central Java to give recommendation to any new puppeteers of Po Te Hie wanting to get legitimation. The same thing also occurred to Javanese shadow puppet wherein Ki Narto Sabdo used to be the one who could give recommendation.

Nevertheless, it is admitted that classical Chinese legends, myths and tales are still the narrative source of Po Te Hie's performances. So, it seems that Javanese legends, myths and tales have not been yet (or even will never be?) the narrative source of Po Te Hie. Thio Tiong Gie personally admitted that he had no courage to do that. The argument could be so tricky and twofold. First is because the very "soul" of Po Te Hie is of naturally Chinese, and second is because of "practical reason". The later is assumed to have arisen from the socio-political "considerations". These "practical considerations" may deal with the fear of negative reactions from either Javanese as the biggest ethnic group in Indonesia or Chinese communities themselves.

Vis a Vis Sino-Javanese shadow puppet itself that could be said as a syncretic art of Chinese and Javanese, for its narrative source, still faces similar situation with Po Te Hie. This Sino-Javanese art grounds its stories on classical Chinese folklores though its use of style, staging, heraldry and ranks, humble servants, except Semar (read Khoon Choy, 1976: 105), and gamelan orchestra are similar to those of Javanese. Although Javanese culture was of great influence, the narrative sources performed, which were still rooted on Chinese folklore, were undeniable. In other words, acculturation did find its own way and form in this art.

Concluding Remark

Oral narratives considered as being useless and trivial, in fact, possess a capability to be an invaluable educative medium. This invaluable thing is not the kind that ends up in material gains but enlightenment. It is a sort of enlightenment that can make people smile on the irrationality of Sun Go Kong, Sam Pek Eng Tay, Sin Jin Kui, Sing Hong Loya and many more, but that can also make them ponder or brood over the depth of "the messages" implied. Such a moment is less frequent and even almost forgotten in this era when people are hooked up with internet and cellular showing off their post-modernist pride.

The fact that there has already been centuries of cultural exchange and understanding between Chinese and Javanese through "story-telling" could be made an entry point to better see togetherness, peace and harmony. That A Cong may well understand Anglingdarma and Joko knows Sin Jin Kui; feel proud of them, and practice their moral values should not be a dream; therefore it needs tremendous efforts and struggles from time to time, together.

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[1] *Kongco is an idol representing immortals or mortals with divine power to be worshiped for.*

[2] *Prof. Martin Stuart-Fox's idea in his book A Short History of China and South East Asia: Tribute, Trade and Influence, Allen & Unwin: New South Wales, 2003, pp.86-87. He says that one possibility of the purposes of Zheng He's expedition is to introduce and confirm Chinese philosophical concept of "Middle Kingdom". Such concept places Chinese as the "Center of the Universe" (Chakravartin) with its Emperor as "Son of Heaven" to which all-Asian kingdoms, including those of South East Asian should refer. It can be deduced on how Zheng He brought and distributed thousands of Chinese manuscripts to those kingdoms as a way to introduce their influence and how those kingdoms should behave. Read as well Lee Khoon Choy's the Myth of Sampo and His Aides in Indonesia Between Myth and Reality, Nile & Mackenzie, London, 1976, p.94, about "Poortman Incident" (the discovery of Chinese ancient manuscripts in Sam Po Kong, 1925).*

[3] *Warok is a name for an individual who is expert at martial art, having formidable strength and supernatural power. Warok is quite popular in mid and southern regions of East Java such as Tulung Agung, Trenggalek and Ponorogo.*

[4] *Cenggi is a symbolic performance of legends, myths, or tales on wheeled-carts (now on cars) to display one of the episodes where a prominent figure/character display his/her misdeed or might. Cenggi is usually performed in a street carnival.*