

Three Pieces of Characters

FX Harsono has written his Chinese name repeatedly in past works. Harsono defines the repetition of his memory of the three characters in his Chinese name as “Memori Tentang Nama” (“Memory of A Name”) (2009), “Yang Dihapus Kutulis Ulang” (“Rewriting What Have Been Erased”) (2009), and the most notable, “Menulis dalam Hujan” (“Writing in the Rain”) (2011).

The three characters of Harsono’s Chinese name are Oh Hong Boen. This birth name will never be forgotten; however through the implementation of assimilation policy during the New Order (1966) that prohibited the Chinese from presenting their identity (in regard to writings, name, language, tool, objects, and cultural expressions), Harsono was obliged to forget how to write his Chinese name in Chinese characters or *hanzi* (胡丰文). This political policy separated people of Chinese identity from their culture. Harsono experienced the effects of this coercion when he was still in primary school, leaving him with traces of memories of a name that he writes repetitively, in images of futility or obscurity. Writing is remembering.

The assimilation policy suggested that Chinese people avoid changing their names based on their meaning, but instead change it based on its sound or writing. This way, the assimilation would succeed as “*ke-Tionghoa-an menghilang dari nama-nama Tionghoa*” (“the Chinese-ness disappears from Chinese names”)¹.

After that period, the Chinese Indonesians, especially those who had lived for a long time in Java, tried to carry their new name given according to the romanized/latinized pronunciation of their Chinese names. This phenomenon is presented beautifully in Harsono’s long-duration video performance, *Nama* (2019). A choir of youth sing a litany of the changing of the three characters in Chinese names. They sing the names into various designations, to a point where it sounds more “*pribumi*” (Indigenous). This work delivers a contemporary critique about the past instruction to change Chinese names, yet as in Harsono’s other works we never lose hope for the possibility of “rewriting” or finding the meaning of life with a new identity.

Harsono himself ignored the suggestion to align his new name with the pronunciation of his old one. He chose a different path from the majority of the Chinese who are more inclined to follow instructions. “Oh Hong Boen” took a Javanese name that he was fond of, with a new sound and full of meaning. His new name is “Harsono”².

The three characters in Chinese name normally consist of three elements of meaning. The first one is a surname or family name. The following two characters each refer to generational name and given name. The second or generational name is set by the ancestors who choose a character or symbol from a poem. The third one, which is the given name, represents a prayer or hope from the parents to the children. The name Oh Hong Boen means from the family of “Oh” (胡), the generation of “Hong” (丰) and the given name of “Boen” (文). Rewriting these three characters in Harsono’s works is not merely a “*politik aksara*” (“*politic of script*”)³.

The given name is not simply an assemblage of writing. The name bears passion, hopes in life, and social meaning. One’s name represents his existence in the world. One marks their birth and later last pilgrimage with their name. The way Harsono has done his work of remembrance and writing his name is a form of self-narrative that could be called autoethnography. He becomes the subject as well as the object in his work. This self-narrative is implied in Harsono’s works that reenact writing the three characters of his name, giving color to his ethnographic research on the history of violence that was experienced by people of Chinese descent in Indonesia. Unlike in ethnography, here the research breaks the heart of the narrator, and from there on the process of understanding begins.⁴

The structure of the three characters of Harsono’s Chinese name also defines the layers of representation in “Spinae | Duri.” This work presents three layers of definition, textually and hermeneutically just like the structure of his three-character name. In the first layer, Harsono presents archives as material, or the processing of those materials. During the colonial period, archival documents marked Chinese identity as “*Timur Asing*” (“*Foreign East*”) and used it as a controlling tool to restrict their movement. The transition from VOC to the rule of Dutch East Indies tightened the mobility regulations for the Chinese (especially those born in the East Indies). There were regulations on residential areas (*passenstelse*) and travel

permits (*wijkenstelsel*). At the end of the 19th century until the handover of sovereignty (1949), there were three types of identity card for the Chinese in Indonesia: entry permit, residence permit, and residence information. These identity cards record the full names of the parents or family members, physical characteristics, and are stamped with three fingerprints of the owner⁵.

Take note on Harsono's work that shows an identity card for Tan Tiong Bing, a 2-year-old boy whose residence status was annulled or expired. The certificate is dated 1966. An immigration document for a Chinese adult named Tjong Kim Jin issued by an immigration office in Semarang in 1956 shows the renewal of her residence permit in Indonesia, presented in a big, colorful, hand-embroidered piece. The compulsory documents for the Chinese during the independence era cast them as the "*Timur Asing*" group, playing an important role in shaping and freezing a stereotyped perspective towards this community now. Harsono presented the first appearance of text in his installation that shows a boat and a number of candle lamps, in a piece of embroidered carpet, decorated with colorful ornaments of the ancient Chinese culture.

The second layer of text is symbolism. The works in this exhibition highlight boat, crowns, and glowing thorn reeds, colored in white with no streaks nor stains. The boat symbolically presents an interval, a time span between the past and the present, between the present and the future. That is how Harsono, as a fifth generation Chinese Indonesian, marks his nostalgia towards the history and complicated social issues that shaped him. Today, when human mobility has surpassed all physical restrictions, nostalgia towards history and hope for the uncertain future is a form of "nostalgia without memory," a non-existent memory⁷. Another symbolism presented in the form of lights and pieces of old wood that shaped the body of the boat and found objects with various meaningful patterns that once decorated the Chinese's homes in the past.

The thorn or thorn crown is the central motif of the exhibition. As a Catholic, Harsono identifies the thorn crown as a weaving placed on Christ's head as a symbol of blasphemy or disgrace, a stigma of an accused crime⁸. The placement of the thorn crown on authentic identity documents of the Chinese reflects the stigma and mockery apparent in the infamous episode of crucifixion: "Look at this man!" The meaning of this thorn crown also transcends the Dutch insignia that always appears on the official residence permit document for the Chinese, which was known as the "King's paper."

In another installation, elongated thorn reeds are arranged tightly on top of an embroidered canvas: an enlargement of a document. The floating structure after 1998 is a technique used by Harsono to portray the relationship between below-above, victim-threat, helplessness-power⁹.

Harsono's symbols are defined yet distant, just like the second character of the given name has a distance from the family name. Harsono's symbolism is poetic, partial, with repetitive expression. For Harsono, incompleteness has a meaning. The objects have poetic roles and self-sufficiency, just like a text that marks the meaning of a generation within three characters of a Chinese name.

The third layer of text is the given name, referring to identity. In this third layer, Harsono shows his artistic imagination. Imagination is his hope or testimony as an artist, subjective definition of the material aspects of his works. Harsono affixes an aura or *pamor* (prestige) to the thorn crown, releasing his imagination on the forged power and obtaining a magical aura. *Pamor*, associated with *keris* (the Indonesian spiritual dagger), is a unique pattern that emerges from repetitive forging on various metals. Reportedly, during his expedition to *Tanah Jawa* (Java Land) at the beginning of 15th Century, Ma Huan admired the beauty and magical *pamor* of a *keris* that he saw.

Harsono's imagination shows an element of *awang-awang* (atmosphere), a space that freely shades symbols of a journey. He also gives aspects of niche or distance, light and shadows of forest of thorn trees on top of the enlarged archive in the form of hand-embroidered canvas. In his two-dimensional works, which are painted or printed, the third element is finally blended in: historical document or fragments, symbolism, and imagination about intangible boundaries.

Hendro Wiyanto

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Notes

1. Wiyanto, Hendro. *FX Harsono: Sebuah Monografi*, p. 15. Jakarta: Gang Kabel, 2022
2. “The number of Chinese in Indonesian once estimated by determining the Chinese-ness based on their family name. Before the implementation of the name change regulation, someone who still bears their family name is still considered a Chinese. However, after the implementation, it is nearly impossible to recognize the Chinese based on their family name.” Dawis, Aimee, Phd. *Orang Indonesia Tionghoa Mencari Identitas*, translated by Maria Elvire Sundah, End Note 2, p. 14. Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2010.
3. The case study for this matter was Harsono’s name, of which they were unable to recognize the origin or the family name.
4. Raihul Fadjri, Raihul. “Politik Aksara Oh Hong Boen”, *Tempo*, 21 July 2013.
5. “In Harsono’s works, especially post 1998, this self-narrative cannot be separated from the artist’s effort to understand the changes in terms of the social context. Shakka, Anne. *Cilik-Cilik Cina: Autoetnografi Politik Identitas*, Introduction by Dr. Katrin Bandel, p. 46-47. Yogyakarta: Sanata Dharma University Press, 2019.
6. “The use of passport, photograph, and fingerprints to record those who travels took place through a process in the span of 1880-1920, when the (Western) colonial authority tried to control the Asian migration.” Kwartanada, Didi. “The Papers that Surveilled: Identity Cards and Suspicion of the Chinese”, *Gazing on Identity*, FX Harsono’s Solo Exhibition Catalog at ARNDT Fine Art Pte Ltd, p. 9. Singapore: Gilman Barracks, Singapore, 28 October – 20 November 2016.
7. “Before the 1990, the difference between the European, Chinese, and local Indonesians are not in regards of race and tradition. Each person (mestizo, European, Chinese, and local Indonesians) is considered sharing blood, tradition, and language. However, according to their law, they are European, Chinese, and Inlander. The colonial constitution was the one who determined where one should reside, compulsory tax, mandatory law, judging judge, severity of the punishment, and even the way of dressing. According to Takashi Shiraishi, “A neat racial differences has to be openly presented, precisely because the real racial differences were not even skin deep.” W. Dharmowijono, Widjajanti. *Bukan Takdir: Kisah Pencitraan Orang Tionghoa di Nusantara*”, p. 105. Jakarta: Ombak, Yogyakarta, 2021.

8. Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, p. 30. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
9. In the Holy Bible, Jesus' crown was portrayed like this: *And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon His head, and a reed in His right hand: and they bowed to the knee before Him, and mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"* (Matthew 27: 29)
10. The connection between the enlarged "king's paper" and the thorn reeds that is palced gloating in the middle of a room could give birth to an imagination on other tragic episodes. "In 1897, a Chinese named Tan Teng Kok who never had a residence permit for 18 years, decided to hang himself because he could not bear the police treatment towards him." Kwartanada, Didi, "The Papers that Surveilled: Identity Cards and Suspicion of the Chinese", p, 12.