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Writing in the rain: Erasure, trauma, and Chinese Indonesian identity in the recent work of FX Harsono

Philip Smith

This is an examination of the recent work of Indonesian visual artist FX Harsono in relation to Chinese Indonesian identity, the erasure of history, and the challenge of communicating through trauma. It is my hope that this work will contribute to the dialogue on both the Chinese Indonesian experience and large-scale ethnic violence.

Since 2013 I have been living and teaching in Jakarta. During my time here I have encountered, through friends, colleagues, students, and family, fragmentary descriptions of life under Suharto in the latter half of the twentieth century and the riots in the late 1990s. A relative, for example, recently apologised when she could not sustain a conversation in Mandarin, explaining that when she was young the language was not allowed; a friend reported that as a teenager he was not permitted to attend a state university because he was officially classified as Chinese; at the age of 12 my wife was sent from her family home to be educated in Singapore because Jakarta was no longer safe. These and other stories trace the shape of a long history of violence and mass expulsion to which Chinese Indonesians have been subjected.

Anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia spans multiple generations and amount to, potentially, more than a million lives lost, with many more individuals displaced, traumatised, and financially ruined. I am motivated to write this article because I hear in these fragments a yearning for acknowledgement; attendant to the act of mourning is the need for public recognition of what has occurred and efforts toward emotional reparation. While, as shall be discussed below, certain scholarly and investigative work has

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attempted to address this need, and the Indonesian government has facilitated a (perhaps superficial) revival of Chinese language and culture, such gestures toward public recognition have not been generally forthcoming. The visual artist FX Harsono represents one of very few individuals I have encountered who has been able to collect some of the fragments of Chinese Indonesian history and assemble from them a means toward mourning and recognition of what took place.

This essay will begin with a brief overview of the political and historical circumstances of Chinese Indonesians, particularly in terms of the rhetoric that has informed their relationship with their non-Chinese neighbours. It shall then examine the process of mourning in the work of Indonesian artist FX Harsono, specifically the ways in which his recent work explores both the relationship between language and identity and the gaps in Chinese Indonesian history, and attests to the anti-narrative effect of trauma. The central argument is that Harsono's work attests to the inadequacy of the superficial celebration of Chinese culture in modern Indonesian society.

A history of violence

Whilst post-1998 Indonesia is being heralded as a model of transition from dictatorship to democracy, beneath that success lies a still-palpable rhetoric of religious, political, and ethnic intolerance. Filomeno V. Aguilar contends that 'the segment of the Indonesian population composed of "Chinese" is often excluded from the moral community of the nation because of their supposed absence of "roots" on Indonesian soil [...] Chinese are [...] ideologically constructed as aliens and often used as scapegoats'.¹ Communities of diasporic Chinese (*Orang Tionghoa*, or more crudely, *Orang Cina*) have existed in Indonesia since at least the seventeenth century.² Various Chinese Indonesians have been involved in many of the key moments in the country's history such as resistance against the Dutch and the reading of the Youth Pledge in 1928.³ While Chinese Indonesians themselves have often been divided internally by religion or degree of assimilation, they have typically been regarded as a single group by their neighbours. Despite their long-standing place in Indonesian history (longer, indeed, than can be covered here), and the major contribution made by many Chinese Indonesians to the national

1 Filomeno V. Aguilar, 'Citizenship, inheritance, and the indigenizing of "Orang Chinese" in Indonesia', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 9, 3 (2001): 501–33.

2 Anthony Reid, *Sojourners and settlers: Histories of Southeast Asia and the Chinese* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

3 E.I. Wibowo, 'Mendulang nasionalisme aktivisme politik Orang Tionghoa pasca-Suharto', *Setelah air mata kering, masyarakat Tionghoa pasca-peristiwa Mei 1998* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2010).

economy (as much as 70 per cent of private economic activity), as a group they have been typically viewed as outsiders by other Indonesians.⁴

When Indonesia was under colonial rule the Dutch government operated a policy of divide and rule motivated mainly by their fear that the Chinese and the indigenous population might unify against colonial rule.⁵ The Chinese were classified as foreign nationals, forbidden from living in the same neighbourhoods as other ethnic groups, made to dress distinctively (with a long queue and traditional Chinese clothing), and made to carry different identification documents. Chinese businessmen often acted as intermediaries and tax collectors for the Dutch. Stories abound during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of wealthy Chinese who bribed the colonial rulers so that they might exploit Javanese farmers.⁶ The perception of Chinese Indonesians as alien, elitist, and economically exploitative has persisted in the minds of many native Indonesians today. This resentment was compounded, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by the large number of immigrants who came to Indonesia from China. In the early twentieth century local aggression toward the Chinese spilt over into riots led by members of the indigenous trading cooperative Sarekat Islam, a group who subscribed to the image of their Chinese neighbours as exploitative and greedy.

During the Second World War Indonesia was captured by the Japanese army. Under Japanese rule the Chinese were a target of persecution, often in the form of arrests and executions. This aggression was related to the long-running Sino-Japanese war. More than half of the 1,500 executed under Japanese rule were ethnically Chinese.⁷ In the chaotic aftermath of Japanese rule, as advancing Dutch forces reclaimed Indonesia, radical Muslim groups and the various militia which would become the Indonesian army massacred many Chinese. The largest of these incidents took place in Tangerang, where around six hundred were killed.

Indonesia became independent from the Netherlands in 1949. During the first few years of independence issues concerning the legal citizenship (and thus loyalty) of Chinese Indonesians arose. These questions were

4 Adam Schwarz, *A nation in waiting: Indonesia in the 1990s* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

5 Eddie Lembong, 'Indonesian government policies and the ethnic Chinese: Some recent developments', *Ethnic Chinese in contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Leo Suryadinata, pp. 48–56 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

6 L. Vitalis, 'Effects of the revenue farming system', in *Chinese economic activity in Netherlands India: Selected translations from the Dutch*, ed. David Bulbeck and M.R. Fernando (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1992), pp. 26–42.

7 Jemma Purdey, *Anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia, 1996–1999* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), p. 7.

compounded by the heavily anti-Chinese economic and political Assaatist movement, which sought to protect native economic activities. In 1957 Suharto took power. Indonesia under Suharto saw the introduction of many laws which sought to control and limit the economic activities of Chinese Indonesians. In 1967 Presidential Instruction 14 banned the use of Chinese written characters in Indonesia, removing the possibility of both in-group communication and a means by which Chinese Indonesian identity was imparted. The anti-communist hysteria which characterised Suharto's reign led to the massacre of roughly half-a-million individuals between 1965 and 1966. Much of what occurred during that time remains unknown and, indeed, it is unlikely that we will ever have a full picture of what took place. From the information which is available, Jemma Purdey and Adam Schwarz both warn that we should not assume Chinese Indonesians were the sole target during this era, not least because many of the major massacres occurred in rural areas where there were no Chinese inhabitants.⁸ Much of the violence did have an ethnic element, however, and there were many racially motivated killings under the guise of anticommunism.

One group which suffered heavily during this time were the Chinese who had returned to Indonesia after being educated in China. The Chinese Revolution and subsequent issues of *jus sanguinis* (the inheritance of nationality) for overseas Chinese had long been used as grounds to question the loyalty of Chinese Indonesians. For many Indonesians, Chinese and communist became interchangeable terms. 1966 and 1967 saw outbreaks of mass violence and widespread torture and humiliation of Chinese Indonesians. In Aceh, North Sumatra, West and East Java, and South Sulawesi there were riots and mass expulsions of Chinese from cities. Many of the refugees came to live in makeshift camps in terrible conditions. In 1966 Major General Soemitro, who was charged with the protection of East Kalimantan, sought the complete annihilation of Chinese culture in the area under his rule:

I didn't allow [Chinese Indonesians] to live in villages, I didn't want them to trade. I didn't want them in business. No public use of the Chinese language, no Chinese books, no public speaking of Chinese, no Chinese shrines. Nothing. We need a comprehensive solution.⁹

Ethnic violence erupted once more in the late 1990s when Chinese Indonesians were the largest group targeted during a wave of riots in major Indonesian cities. Whilst it would be dangerous to generalise

8 Purdey, *Anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia*.

9 Quoted in Schwarz, *A nation in waiting*, p. 106.

about the social, historical, and political factors which led to these events, it is certainly the case that many of the perpetrators were motivated by the belief that Chinese Indonesians both benefit from, and work to maintain, Indonesia's wealth gap, a gap which was all the more palpable during the economic crisis of the 1990s. The death toll from the riots has been estimated at over 1,000, with many further accounts of rapes and other attacks and destruction of property.¹⁰ Buildings were looted and then set on fire with the owners trapped inside. Individuals reported that emergency calls to the police went unanswered. The official reports on the riots from police and the Jakarta government massively understate the number of deaths and extent of damage compared with journalistic and academic sources. Indonesia's House of Representatives declared the events to be 'ordinary crimes'.¹¹ Many of the surviving victims have expressed dissatisfaction with the criminal investigation that ensued; Max Ridwan Sijabat reports that the investigative team failed to gather the suspects in court despite multiple summons.¹² Nurfika Osman and Ulman Haryanto describe the challenges faced by the many rape victims whose assailants have still not been discovered or charged.¹³

The political aftermath has seen several, perhaps misplaced, gestures of cultural recognition for Chinese Indonesians. These efforts include the removal of restrictions on the use of Mandarin, the banning of the terms *pribumi* (indigenous) and *non-pribumi* in official documents, and the adoption of Chinese New Year as a national holiday in 2003. Recent years have also seen certain Chinese Indonesians such as Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (鍾萬鏞) admitted to public office. These steps all represent positive changes in the political status of Chinese Indonesians, but they indicate a focus on forgetting rather than acknowledging what occurred. This has particularly been the case with architecture such as the new Glodok Plaza mall, which has been built at one of the major sites of the 1998 violence, not as a memorial, but as a means to overwrite the violence of the past century.¹⁴

10 Purdey, *Anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia*, p. 123.

11 Ridwan Max Sijabat, 'Six years after, May 1998 tragedy still unresolved', *Jakarta Post*,

13 May 2004, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2004/05/13/six-years-after-may-1998-tragedy-still-unresolved.html> (last accessed 27 Oct. 2014).

12 Sijabat, 'Six years after'.

13 Nurfika Osman and Ulman Haryanto, 'Still no answers, or peace, for many rape victims', *Jakarta Globe*, 14 May 2010, <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/archive/still-no-answers-or-peace-for-many-rape-victims/374845/> (last accessed 27 Oct. 2014).

14 Abidin Kusno, 'Remembering/forgetting the May riots: Architecture, violence and the making of "Chinese culture"', *Public Culture* 15, 1 (2003): 149–77.

It is the central concern of FX Harsono's work that, despite the scale and number of massacres, countless acts of humiliation, and mass expulsions of Chinese Indonesians throughout the twentieth century, these events remain largely unexplored and marginalised in Indonesian history as it is taught today. Harsono writes that it was only through his own research, prompted by the discovery of contemporary photographs, that he became aware of the mass killings of the late 1940s.¹⁵

In contrast to the silence of previous decades, international coverage and analysis of the riots of the late 1990s has been significant and extensive. John Thayer Sidel contends that '[d]espite considerable logistical difficulties and political restrictions, Indonesian newspapers and magazines have published countless articles reporting on — and in some cases even investigating — the riots, pogroms, and bombings that have occurred since 1995.'¹⁶ Whilst much of the ethnic, religious, and political violence which has taken place remains downplayed or ignored in official reports and investigations, a counter-discourse led by journalists and scholars has sought to document these events. This work has signalled the need for a longer view of Chinese Indonesian history as a means to understand the context for the violence of the 1990s. We are indebted to scholars and writers such as Kwee Thiam Tjing (1947), Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1960), Leonard Blussé (1981), Benedict Anderson (2001), Charles Coppel (2002), Jemma Purdey (2006), the contributors to Leo Suryadinata's edited volume (2008), and Takashi Shiraishi (2011) for undertaking this task.¹⁷

The empirical academic and investigative work on the history of discrimination and violence toward Chinese Indonesians leaves in its wake the need for mourning and alternate forms of historiography which engage not only with the question of what occurred, but of how one can meaningfully respond. Established artists such as Nyoman Nuarta, Dadang Christanto, Heri Dono, young artists such as Ha Neul Shin, and authors such as Seno Gumira Ajidarma have sought to understand the acts of

15 FX Harsono, 'Artist's statement', *FX Harsono show catalogue* (Yogyakarta: Galeri Canna, 2013), p. 91.

16 John Thayer Sidel, *Riots, pogroms, jihad: Religious violence in Indonesia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007).

17 Kwee Thiam Tjing, *Indonesia dalem api dan bara* (Jakarta: Lembaga Kajian Masalah Kebangsaan, 2004); Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Hoa Kiau di Indonesia* (Bintang: Bintang Press, 1960); Leonard Blussé, 'Batavia, 1619–1740: The rise and fall of a Chinese colonial town', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, 1 (1981): 159–78; Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Violence and the state in Suharto's Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Charles A. Coppel, *Studying ethnic Chinese in Indonesia* (Singapore: Singapore Society of Asian Studies, 2002); Suryadinata, ed. *Ethnic Chinese in contemporary Indonesia*; Takashi Shiraishi, 'Anti Sinicism in Java's New Order', in *Essential outsiders*, ed. Daniel Chirot and Anthony Reid (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011): 187–207.

ethnic violence in Indonesia in terms of affect.¹⁸ The question of a proper emotional response to the many incidents of wide-scale violence committed against Chinese Indonesians is not a simple one to address. The following sections shall examine the work of Indonesian artist FX Harsono in relation to Chinese Indonesian history and the act of mourning.

FX Harsono: Rewriting the erased

Born Oh Hong Boen, baptised Fransiskus Xavrius, FX Harsono (who adopted this name after the compulsory changing of names) has been described as one of 'Indonesia's most important living artists'.¹⁹ He was born in Blitar, East Java in 1949. His parents were of Chinese descent although his maternal grandmother was Javanese. He studied painting at the Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia (ASRI, Institute of the Arts) in Yogyakarta, but was later expelled for his involvement in *Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru* (New Art Movement), a collective of Indonesian artists who sought to escape the 'safe' Western-influenced art promoted by ASRI and to create a distinctive and politically engaged Indonesian voice in the art world.²⁰ He later completed his studies at the Jakarta Arts Institute. He now lectures at Pelita Harapan University, Tangerang. He has been exhibiting work in Indonesia and abroad since 1973.²¹

Harsono's work is both politically barbed and eminently personal. Prior to the fall of Suharto he took great risks by producing works of unabashed political satire; his 1993–94 installation *Voice without a voice/Sign* showed the word 'DEMOKRASI' spelt in international sign language with certain letters bound by ropes. The installation was attended by two government intelligence officers: 'They tried to understand the meaning of my work and wanted to question me about it,' Harsono explains. 'Fortunately I wasn't [at the exhibition] at that time, so I was lucky.'²² He risked arrest again in 1997 by staging a show in Yogyakarta during the 'silent week' which preceded the national election. During the performance he destroyed three *Panji* masks, representing Indonesia's three major

18 See, for example, Nyoman Nuarta's 'Nightmare' (1999), Dadang Christanto's 'Kekerasam' (1995), Heri Dono's 'Octopusation' (2012), and Seno Gumira Ajidarma's story 'Clara', *Republika*, 26 June 1998.

19 Iola Lenzi, 'FX Harsono at Singapore Art Museum', *Asian Art*, Apr. 2011, pp. 15–16.

20 Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop, 'FX Harsono's rebellious, critical voice against "big power" in Indonesia', *New York Times*, 11 Mar. 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/12/arts/12iht-Jessop.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (last accessed 27 Oct 2014).

21 Amanda Katherine Rath, Hendro Wiyanto, Seng Yu Jin and Tan Siuli, *Re: Petition/Position/FX Harsono* (Magelang: Langgeng Art Foundation, 2010).

22 *Art Radar Asia*, 'FX Harsono and the art of political protest: Para Site Hong Kong Artist Talk', 23 Apr. 2013, <http://artradarjournal.com/2013/04/23/fx-harsono-and-the-art-of-political-protest-para-site-hong-kong-artist-talk/> (last accessed 27 Oct 2014).

political parties. Since the fall of Suharto his work has begun to comment even more openly on events in Indonesia: his 1998 piece, just months after the Jakarta riots, showed a video of the artist burning objects shaped like human torsos — an unmistakable, and perhaps cathartic, recreation of the traumatic incidents witnessed by many.

The act of naming

Many of the concepts Harsono has been working with coalesced in *Rewriting the erased*, which appeared in his 2009 'The Erased Time' exhibition in Jakarta and Singapore, which featured a video of the artist in a darkened room repeatedly writing his Chinese name — 'the only thing he can write in Chinese characters'.²³ Many of those who have viewed the piece were struck by the earnestness of its delivery. Christine Clark wrote that '[w]hat is affecting is the obvious loss and intense demonstration of will; the awkwardness and the lack of calligraphic fluency is defied by the unre-served attempt to reclaim the lost past.'²⁴ *Rewriting the erased* introduces one of the central themes of his recent work, namely the politics of loss and erasure in recorded history.

Under Suharto, Chinese Indonesians were not permitted to use their Chinese names; in one of many anti-Chinese laws, the Cabinet Presidium Decision 127 in 1966 stated that Chinese Indonesians must adopt Indonesian-sounding names. The removal of the ban on Mandarin Chinese in the early twenty-first century means that Chinese Indonesians alive today once more have access to the language of the generations which came before. Harsono's *Rewriting the erased* thus represents the act of reclaiming part of a lost language and, with that, a cultural identity. It is significant that the title of the piece is in English rather than Indonesian; even though Harsono cannot write in Chinese, he refuses to use the Indonesian language he was made to learn as a child. In this piece the act of writing one's Chinese name takes on an aura of urgency; by producing his name over and over again Harsono struggles, perhaps ineffectually, to create a record of himself which resists erasure. By producing so many iterations of his name he conveys a desire to leave a written record so that, unlike the hundreds of thousands who have been killed, his name will not be lost or marginalised in the historical record. The piece

23 Mia Maria, 'A hidden history of injustice: Mia Maria discovers a haunting past through FX Harsono's art', *Jakarta Globe*, 22 July 2013, <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/features/a-hidden-history-of-injustice/> (last accessed 27 Oct 2014).

24 Christine Clark, 'Beyond the self', *National Portrait Gallery*, Canberra, 2011, http://www.portrait.gov.au/site/exhibition_subsite_beyondtheself_essay.php#start (last accessed 27 Oct 2014).

conveys the anxiety of one who feels the pressing relevance of history upon his own life and has no trust in his government to protect him from the fate which others have suffered before him.

The theme of resisting erasure is central in his 2013 exhibition 'what we have perceived here as truth/ we shall encounter one day as beauty' at Jogja National Museum from 1 to 22 July 2013. Harsono states that the works stem from his revelation that:

many things related to the issue of the Chinese had been hidden or removed from the writing of the Indonesian history, whether this is related to tragic events like murders or discrimination, or to positive things such as the participation of the Chinese in the Indonesian struggle for freedom and the development of the nation.²⁵

The exhibition recognises the deaths of Chinese Indonesians and the suppression of their memory, and it attempts to build some form of discourse around that void. The absence of written records is manifest in the recurring metaphor of official Indonesian state history as rain: that which washes away. In *Ranjang hujan* (The raining bed) rain falls within an elaborate *Peranakan* bed onto either letters (in the Yogyakarta exhibition) or books (in the version which was displayed at Art Stage Singapore in 2014). Text scrolling behind the bed reads:²⁶

Dalam tidur kuurai masa lalu, di ujung pena sejarah direka, di ujung senapan sejarah ditipu, di ujung pancuran sejarah tersapu.

(In my sleep I am entangled in the past, at the tip of the pen history is predicted, at the tip of the gun history is deceived, at the end of the fountain history washed away.)²⁷

The piece refers directly to the underreporting, suppression, and wilful forgetting which, Harsono submits, has characterised the treatment of Chinese Indonesian history by the state. The words on the bed stand in place of the absent history to which they pertain. These words, too, are threatened with erasure so that even the recognition of the absence of historical records will soon disappear from our consciousness. The bed, a synecdoche for the home and family, signifies the vulnerability of personal historiography; those who are forgotten in Indonesia's sanctioned history may still be remembered informally among families and communities,

25 FX Harsono, 'Artist's statement', p. 93.

26 The term *Peranakan* is used to describe individuals of Chinese descent who live in Indonesia and Malaysia.

27 FX Harsono, 'Artist's statement', p. 66.

Fig 1 'Ranjang Hujan' (The Raining Bed) FX Harsono: wooden bed, stainless steel, pump machine, water, ceramics, fabric, and LED running text.

Photograph © Stephanie Tanzil Smith, used with photographer's permission.

but those memories are themselves vulnerable. Like dreams, they can easily evaporate.

The theme of rain returns once more in the installation *Writing in the rain* (first shown in 2011). Here Harsono points to a crisis in the education of Chinese Indonesians. In this piece a row of three school desks are carved through with deep Chinese characters. In front of the desks a video shows the artist writing his Chinese name, only for his writing surface to be washed clean by the rain. The use of now-empty heavy school desks refers to the Chinese school system which existed in Indonesia until 1947. The piece speaks to the importance of education, not only in Chinese writing but in imparting knowledge of Chinese Indonesian history. Like rain, the closure of Chinese Indonesian schools has wiped away the possibility of a communicable and internally formed cultural history.

Harsono's central message in these works is that the act of reclaiming one's name fails to facilitate the process of mourning. His name has been returned to him, but the historical circumstances of its removal remain

unarticulated. The few characters he is able to write signify the thousands which remain unwritten, and hence the entire language and, perhaps more vitally, the names of individuals, lost. The vital importance of creating a written record, however incomplete it might be, is crucial given the emphasis on *forgetting* which has characterised much of the discourse (in both politics and architecture) concerning the riots of the late 1990s. This act of forgetting bespeaks not only the lack of discourse concerning the historical and more recent violence, but the creation of a superficial and homogenised Chinese culture through the celebration of Chinese New Year. In the exhibition catalogue Hendro Wiyanto, the show's curator, reports that for him Harsono's work asks: 'How can I say that I am Chinese when I understand nothing of China-ness? [...] How am I supposed to give name to my culture?'²⁸ These two questions address the Indonesian government's celebration of superficial chinoiserie as a means to 'tranquillise, if not erase the memories of the May riots'.²⁹ In the void left by the 'washing away' of Chinese Indonesian identity and history, these official gestures toward chinoiserie serve as a simulacrum of a culture which is no more familiar to Chinese Indonesians than it is to their non-Chinese neighbours.

As a means to address the inadequacy of the homogenising state-designed Chinese culture, Harsono thus seeks to uncover the personal as historical fragments of that which has been lost. In this quest he has crafted a visual historiography of his own idiosyncratic family culture. The elements he draws upon do not originate from the totalising Chinese identity offered by the Indonesian government, but from scattered and personal artefacts. Many of the works make use of photographs and family stories as a means to rebuild an erased world. In these works each recovered fragment signifies not the recovered object itself, but the absence of that which has been erased. The construction of this lost world blends the political and the personal. *Sisi-dalam kehidupan* (The inner side of life), for example, features cotton garments with stories written inside. These stories fill the interior of the clothes in which they are written, but the clothes themselves are empty. They remain suspended, tracing the shape of the subject to which the story relates. By telling personal and familial stories, Harsono seeks to give some shape to the culture that has been lost.

The absent figures of *Sisi-dalam kehidupan* not only attest to the erased Chinese Indonesian culture which Harsono seeks, perhaps in vain, to

28 Hendro Wiyanto, 'Curatorial: Truth, beauty and FX Harsono's quest', in *FX Harsono Show Catalogue*, pp. 11–13.

29 Kusno, 'Remembering/forgetting the May riots': 167.

recreate, they also both represent the lacuna of trauma and suggest a means toward healing that trauma. It is to this subject that we shall now turn.

The unspeakable

Harsono is not only the heir to generations of inherited trauma. He has first-hand experience; he lived through Suharto's anticommunist purges as well as the violence of the 1990s. In 1965, as a child, he was asked to 'prove' that he was not part of a Beijing-led conspiracy and narrowly avoided being forcibly drafted into a violent mob. During the 1998 riots in Jakarta (some of the bloodiest) he was forced to go to the central train station in order to travel to his mother's funeral and, H.G. Masters suggests, may have witnessed or even been subject to some of the atrocities which occurred during those chaotic days.³⁰ The trauma to which he attests is not simply the result of research; it is personal and immediate. He has witnessed atrocities and felt fear so intense and shattering as to issue a challenge to his capacity for expression.

Certain literary models of trauma characterise the traumatic moment as an event (or, indeed, events) too shattering to be fully apprehended. Trauma 'issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge'.³¹ It demolishes the individual's capacity to comprehend and articulate their experience and subjectivity in narrative. The ongoing repercussions of trauma also involve repeated and involuntary return to the moment of trauma. Harsono's inability to write anything other than his name in *Rewriting the erased* is thus indicative not only of the suppression of historical identities, but of the impossibility of articulating that which both must and cannot be spoken. The horrors he has uncovered and lived through leave him unable to speak. He is caught in an unresolvable bind; he has borne witness to events which demand to be made known, and yet the traumatic impact of those events removes the possibility of articulation.

Siegel submits that the May 1998 riots remain unique in this history of Chinese Indonesians because the widespread rapes, unlike the destruction of property, could neither be easily compensated for nor erased.³² This violence represents a traumatic vacuum which calls for a complete and irreversible alteration which does not only affect the victim's sense of selfhood. It affects an entire family and the generations to follow. This trauma, he argues, calls for a reinvention of the relationship between the

30 H.G. Masters, 'This is history: FX Harsono', *Art Asia Review*, Oct. 2013, pp. 114–23.

31 Roger Luckhurst, *The trauma question* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 79.

32 James T. Siegel, 'Thoughts on the violence of May 13 and 14, 1998, in Jakarta', in *Violence and the state in Suharto's Indonesia*, ed. Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, pp. 190–213 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

subject and the state; many of those who were raped during the riots described a desire to build a new life in a new country, in a non-Indonesian context, and, indeed, many did leave Indonesia never to return. The trauma of the May riots cannot simply be washed away; it has been stamped onto the very question of what it means to be Chinese Indonesian. To escape the trauma of what occurred, if such an escape were even to be possible, would entail cutting away any sense of Indonesian selfhood.

In models of trauma from literary theory and clinical psychology the act of writing (and if writing is too difficult, drawing) can, in some cases, serve as a means by which the traumatised individual can begin to make sense of what happened to them and to reconstruct their understanding of the world.³³ The challenge attendant to articulating trauma is impossible in an Indonesian context given that Indonesian does not have a direct translation for the word 'trauma' (in many accounts of the May riots, the word had to be imported from English). Trauma can therefore not be integrated into Indonesian selfhood by way of language. In this respect in *Rewriting the erased* Harsono has been denied the language of his parents, cultural architecture which may bring a degree of self-knowledge, and familial support. He has also been denied the ability to integrate trauma within his own identity. He thus remains arrested and inarticulate. The traumatic void continually drags him back to his Chinese name; the single communicable fragment which he has salvaged from a history of violence.

Questions of history, culture, and personal trauma do not remain in discrete categories in Harsono's work, but bleed into one another; it is in the process of rebuilding the traumatised self that Harsono encounters more fragments of the historical subjects and mass violence shot through the world he seeks to uncover. His father, a photographer, had documented the discovery of mass graves during the 1950s; these photographs are among the family artefacts that Harsono draws upon in the process of investigating his own family culture. These mass graves are evidence of the large-scale killing of Chinese which took place in the villages around Blitar between 1947 and 1949, in the aftermath of Japanese rule.³⁴ The photographs themselves appeared in Harsono's work *Darkroom* in 2009. In studying these graves Harsono becomes fixated upon the lists of names of the deceased. His work *Rewriting on the tomb* (a direct reference to *Rewriting the erased*) involves carefully tracing these names onto fabric.

33 Arthur Frank, *The wounded storyteller: Body, illness and ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

34 Purdey, *Anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia*.

Harsono chose to trace these characters using red pastel, the colour of both superficial chinoiserie and of blood. The symbolism represents both the superficiality of sanctioned Chinese Indonesian culture and the atrocities which it disguises.

The sheets appear, from a distance, to run with blood, symbolising the immediacy of the trauma to which they attest. This violence, Harsono suggests, is not contained within a historical instance, but is eminently relevant for Indonesian society, Chinese Indonesian identity, and his own traumatised worldview. It is a still-open wound which, in the absence of mourning and healing, continues to bleed. Wiyanto reports that Harsono

was at [a] loss as he tried to spell out those hundreds of names. He made tracing on layers upon layers of unbleached cotton fabric, 'rekindling' dead alphabets, affirming the vague, transferring the emotions and the strokes of the texts to the monochromatic strokes of his own making.³⁵

The act of writing the names of the dead resonates with the act of signing his own name in *Rewriting the erased*. By writing his name Harsono simultaneously affirms his own existence and anticipates his death. His signature locates him alongside the deceased and entombed Chinese Indonesians who came before; as one who bears the trauma of life in Suharto's Indonesia and the riots of the 1990s, he counts himself among them. This act serves to both connect him with the traumatised and erased culture to which he belongs, and to recognise the relevance of those deaths for all Indonesians living today.

If *Rewriting the erased* manifests the silence of trauma then *Sisi-dalam kehidupan* represents the first tentative steps toward finding a voice. The stories which appear in the installation attest to the partial restoration of self through narrative. Even if the figures we seek remain inaccessible, Harsono proposes, the history which remains around the edges of the void can be made tangible. By telling the few stories which can be told, we can begin to construct the shape of the stories which cannot be told, and by doing so we can trace the edges of the void which is left.

Conclusion

Whilst, as we have argued above, Harsono's work is powerful testament to both personal trauma and the erasure of history, we must also recognise its potential limits. His work, like many other examples of good art, makes significant demands upon its viewer. To fully appreciate these installations, one must approach them with a sensitivity for both the political and historical circumstances under which they were constructed, a demand which

35 Wiyanto, 'Curatorial: Truth, beauty and FX Harsono's quest', p. 17.

many Indonesians (of Chinese descent or otherwise) may be unwilling or even unable to meet.

In a photograph of Harsono which appeared on the cover of the September/October 2013 issue of *Arts Asia Pacific*, we see him applying a chainsaw to burning masks and wooden chairs. His face is painted red and white and he wears a business suit. As one looks at the photograph, one's eyes are drawn to the crowd of onlookers who witness this performance. Many wear expressions which betray bemusement rather than appreciation. One young man, who cups his chin in his hands, looks positively bored. Regrettably, Harsono's exhibitions are rarely attended by, or indeed marketed to, those who do not belong to Indonesia's wealthy and educated classes (as evidenced by the use of English in the show catalogue and many of the installations). Indeed, there is a danger that, by using a medium which is largely the domain of the educated few, Harsono risks both reinforcing the perception of Chinese Indonesians as spoilt, snobbish, and elitist whilst simultaneously alienating many of them. This criticism pertains to a debate concerning the role of art in society over which much ink has already been spilt and is exclusive to neither Harsono nor to his medium. The demanding nature of Harsono's work (for both the artist and the viewer) does not necessarily indicate the need for Chinese Indonesian visual artists to make work of greater mass appeal, rather, it signals a general absence of accessible and articulate cultural forms which engage meaningfully with issues of Chinese Indonesian history and identity.

The history of Indonesians of Chinese descent is shot through with violence and segregation. Much of that history has been irrecoverably lost and, even in the present day, Chinese Indonesians continue to be the subject of scapegoating and superficial gestures of appeasement. As I hope to have shown above, the work of FX Harsono represents a personal battle to create a historical-political Chinese Indonesian identity. He communicates an awareness of the fragility of such an identity; he must contend with the absence of historical records, the danger of being overwritten by state-sponsored chinoiserie, and the anti-narrative impact of personal trauma. His work fights against the 'washing away' of history and displays the drive to both discover and to create a Chinese Indonesian self.