

# An identity constructed out of diversity

By FX Harsono for *Pipeline*, adapted from his presentation at the 2013 *Para Site International Conference* in Hong Kong

I was born in the small town of Blitar in East Java, of Chinese heritage. I came to know Javanese culture from the village where I lived with my grandmother, who was of Javanese descent. I was introduced to aspects of Chinese culture by my parents. I studied at a Chinese school for three

years, before I was enrolled in a Catholic school. There, I was exposed to western culture – although not “western” in its purest sense – through a Catholic education and also from the missionaries. In 1969, I began studying art in Yogyakarta and soon became aware of more refined Ja-

vanese culture. A few years later, I decided to move to Jakarta.

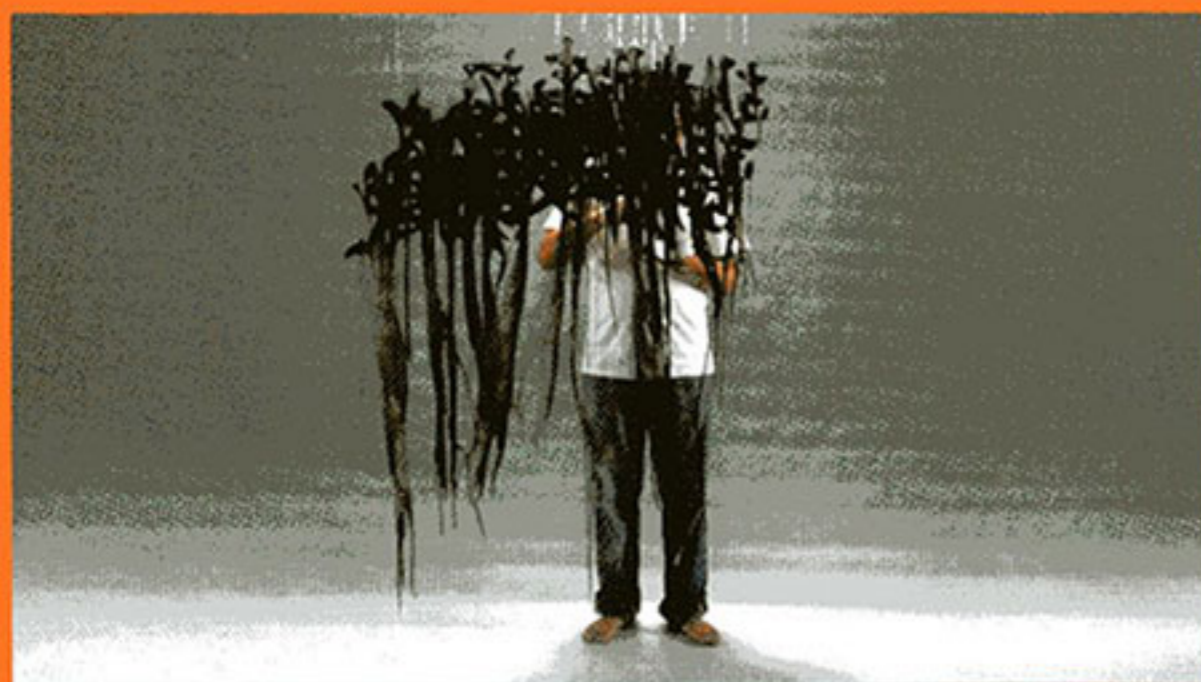
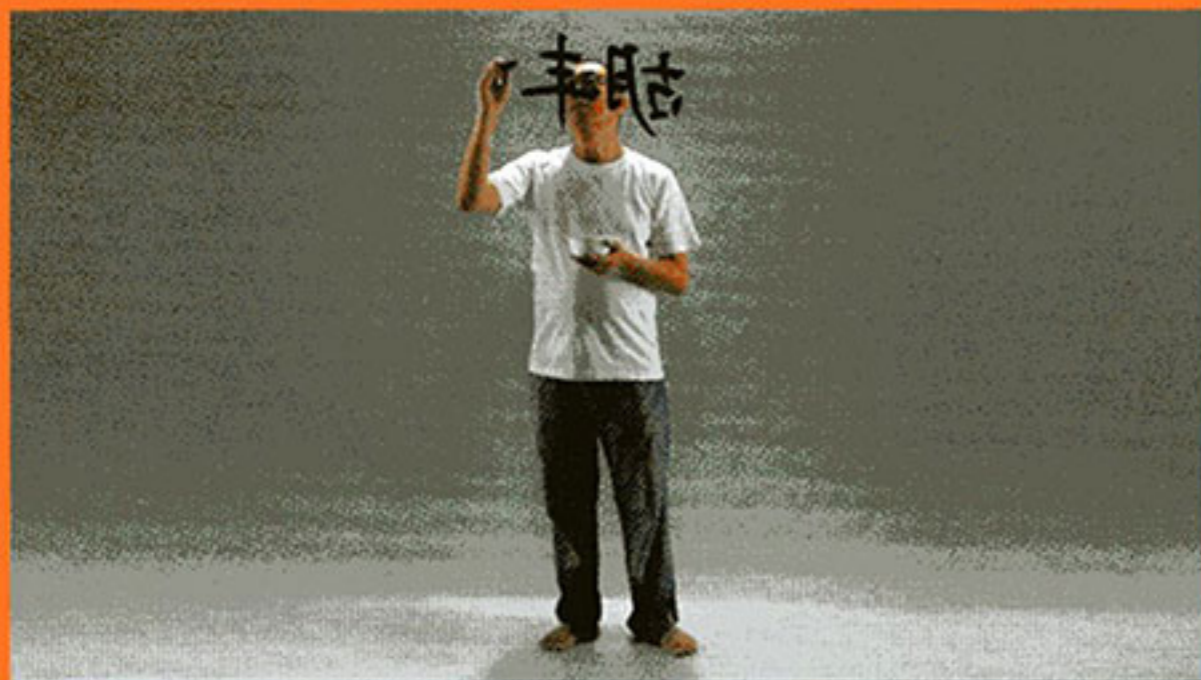
This move indicated that the notions of motherland and cultural roots were not significant to my life. We could even say that there is no geographical or cultural location that may be claimed as my “motherland” or

“roots”. I am only able to describe where I was born and raised. Thus historicity, rather than cultural roots, became more important to me. Identity no longer has a singular meaning for me, and I began to perceive it as something constructed out of diversity. All of these shape me as part of a hybrid entity.

This historical investigation brought me to an awareness regarding my Chinese name. In 1967, a government order was issued, stating that every Tionghoa (Chinese) person who had become an Indonesian citizen must change their name to an Indonesian one. In 2002, when Abdurrahman

Wahid became president, a major change occurred as Tionghoa communities were allowed to celebrate their religions and participate in their own cultural activities. I began making the issue of names a theme for my works, especially Chinese names, in order to remind myself of the past. ▶





In one of the works I created, *Rewriting the Erased Name*, I invited people to write their Chinese names in all honesty and sincerity, without lessening our patriotism towards Indonesia.

As a child, I often flicked through a black photo album at home, in which there were pictures of the exhumation of the Chinese people who had been murdered in 1947-8 in the villages around Blitar. The photo album belonged to my father, a photographer who often told me stories about the exhumation and murders of the Chinese people. In 1951, Chinese community organisation Chung Hua Tsung Hui formed a team to search for and exhume the bodies. My father was involved in the team, with the task of documenting the exhumation.

When the Dutch returned to Indonesia in 1946, after the defeat of the Japanese during World War II, they forced

the Chinese to co-operate both as military police and stand-by troops, and some were stationed as Dutch spies. The Indonesian army retreated inland, conducting guerrilla-type actions in jungles and villages. Before they departed from various cities they performed a scorched-earth strategy known as *bumi hangus*, burning down buildings, factories and other important facilities. Amid this chaos, many of the militia pillaged, robbed and raped the Chinese, whom they considered to have sided with the Dutch, often by coercing them out of cities by declaring that the city must be burned.

The people of several cities in East Java refer to mass graves with the term *bong belang*. "Bong" means "cemetery" in Chinese, while "belung" means "bones" in Javanese. In 1951, two to three years after they were buried, the bodies were exhumed and

what remained was given a proper burial in a mass graveyard assigned to the Chinese.

The solo exhibition *The Erased Time* at the National Gallery of Indonesia in 2009 was the result of a survey, in the form of a video and several installations. Subsequent to the exhibition, I received information from various sources regarding similar cases of mass murder in other cities around Java.

I decided to carry on the research in those other cities, where mass graves had been found. ■

Left  
*Writing In The Rain* by FX Harsono,  
2011. Video, 6:11 min.