

# The Character “Put On” Influence on Peranakan Tionghoa Identity through Indonesian Values

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**How to cite:** Johanes. (2024). The Character “Put On” Influence on Peranakan Tionghoa Identity Through Indonesian Values. *Gondang: Jurnal Seni dan Budaya*, Vol 8(2): Page. 251-261

**Article History :** Received: Jun 13, 2024. Revised: Sept 14, 2024. Accepted: Dec 03, 2024

## ABSTRACT

*"Put On" is the name of a character as well as the title of a comic that was once popular in Indonesia. Put On was published around 1931 by Kho Wan Gie in the mass media. The comic Put On showcases many aspects of Chinese Peranakan culture residing in Jakarta. The Chinese culture depicted in the comic includes language, daily habits, family structure, and the food consumed. In the comic, Put On is portrayed as a mischievous, naive, and childish character, despite being depicted as a large, middle-aged man. This research was conducted using qualitative methods in the form of multimodal analysis and narrative inquiry. Observations from the multimodal analysis method were carried out to examine the graphic narrative elements within the comic, while the narrative inquiry was conducted to gain insight into the reading experience of Put On. The aspects examined in the reading experience include character design (drawing style, physical appearance, and clothing style), language (body gestures and speech), and visualizations of social situations. The results of the research indicate that the Chinese Peranakan identity is not immediately apparent from the design and traits of Put On as the main character. However, it is through his interactions with other characters such as using distinctive language and his inhabit specific social environments that the comic Put On successfully represents peranakan Tionghoa culture.*

## KEYWORDS

Character Design  
Comic  
Peranakan Culture  
Graphic Narrative

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## INTRODUCTION

Comics are a form of sequential art consisting of a series of images within panels, often accompanied by graphic elements such as speech balloons and onomatopoeia (sound effects) to convey a narrative. The narrative in comics is distinctive due to the creative decisions made by the cartoonist in composing the comic, including line strokes, panel types, sizes, spacing, as well as the expressions and drawing style used for the characters presented in a medium (McCloud, 1993:124). Conventional comics are presented on paper, which imposes limitations based on the size of the paper. In terms of publication, comics can be published in book form or serialized in newspapers or magazines.

Comics as a medium have an influence on readers; the content within comics can be easily absorbed due to the combination of graphic elements and text, which are consumed simultaneously. In comics, text can function as dialogue, sound effects, or descriptions from a narrative perspective. In comic creation, certain elements contribute to building a fictional world: theme, character, story, and drawing style (Araki, 2015) The fictional elements in the *Put On* comic can be observed through its character design—a depiction of a chubby man

with a drawing style reminiscent of the American cartoonist George Magnus (Zahar, 2020a) The comic's theme revolves around the daily life of a *peranakan Tionghoa* family, set against the backdrop of Indonesian society in Depok from the 1930s to the 1960s. The elements of fictional world-building in the Put On comic illustrate that the comic represents the culture of the *peranakan Tionghoa* community.

The comic Put On first published in 1930, at that time, comics are also commonly referred to as *tjergam* (illustrated stories), a phenomenon that emerged with the proliferation of reading gardens (*taman bacaan*) in the 1960s. These reading gardens were typically located in strategic areas. For example, in Jakarta, reading gardens could be found around Kota Station, the Lapangan Banteng bus terminal, and various markets such as Pasar Senen, Pasar Cikini, Pasar Lokasari, and Pasar Baru. Although not proportionate to Indonesia's population, the presence of comics in these reading gardens contributed to the golden age of Indonesian comics in 1971, as evidenced by publication numbers reaching 2 to 3 million copies. Comics in reading gardens played a role in fostering a reading habit among the community (Bonneff, 1976). The comic Put On ended in this golden age era, more precisely in 1965.

In this golden age era, many comic artists were of Chinese-Indonesian descent. The background of comic artists as Chinese-Indonesians can be understood as stemming from their tendency to take on jobs considered less prestigious. Chinese-Indonesian comic artists also synergized with publishing ventures run by Chinese-Indonesian merchants. Comic creation and publishing efforts by the Chinese-Indonesian community were typically based in urban areas, making comics a product of urban culture (Bonneff, 1976).

*Put On* is a comic created by Kho Wan Gie, a Chinese-Indonesian descent who often used the pen name Sopo Iku. The *Put On* comic was serialized in a magazine called *Sin Po* from 1930 to 1942, before taking a hiatus and being republished from 1946 to 1965 (Zahar, 2020b). The *Put On* comic holds significant historical value, as it provides insight into cultural developments in Indonesia, which spanning the pre-independence period, shifts in power, and changes in public trends.

Kho Wan Gie, the cartoonist, who is of Chinese-Indonesian descent is what people call as *peranakan Tionghoa*. He was born in 1908 in Indramayu and passed away in Jakarta in 1983. He worked as a shop assistant before shifting his career to become a cartoonist. In terms of drawing style, Kho Wan Gie learned painting from the Washington School of Art in the United States (Kho Wan Gie, 2015:vi). Along with Otto Swastika and Siau Tik Kwie (the painter of *Sie Jin Koei*), he studied painting under J. Frank and H.V. Velthuisen. His learning process led Kho Wan Gie to adopt American composition and drawing styles (Zahar, 2020).

The title of the comic, which corresponds to the name of the main character, Put On, features a middle-aged man who is unemployed and lives with his mother. In his daily life, Put On is portrayed as mischievous but kind. Supporting characters in the comic include Put On's mother (Nee), his two younger brothers (Si Tong and Si Peng), neighbors, and friends (Si A Liuk and Si On Tek), as well as his love interest, Dortji, who never hears a declaration of love from Put On. The comic depicts Put On's everyday activities, such as carrying water during the dry season and dealing with floods during the rainy season (Bonneff, 1976:20).

In the *Put On* comic, the identity of *peranakan Tionghoa* can be observed. According to Stryker (1980), identity is a construction formed through repeated interactions between an individual and their social environment. This reciprocal relationship involves the self as a symbol undergoing negotiation. (Burke & Stets, 2023:2). The self is tied to factors such as gender, race, beauty standards, social status, ethnicity, health, and fashion style (Refaie,

2013:35). The physical aspects of the self serve as symbols that interact with situations, groups, and the surrounding environment. The self, facing social situations and striving to achieve ideal goals, is considered an individual's social force. The social force observed in the *Put On* comic is the way *peranakan Tionghoa* individuals assimilate with the surrounding community in the city of Jakarta (Batavia). The character Put On in the comic interacts with his Peranakan family, friends, superiors, and those around him. These continuous interactions in the comic involve the use of language, social status, lifestyle standards, conflicts, and suggested resolutions, which ultimately shape Put On's identity as a symbol of the Chinese Peranakan community. In the formation of this symbol, the social environment imposes labels on an individual. However, there is an internal negotiation process until an agreement on self-identity is reached.

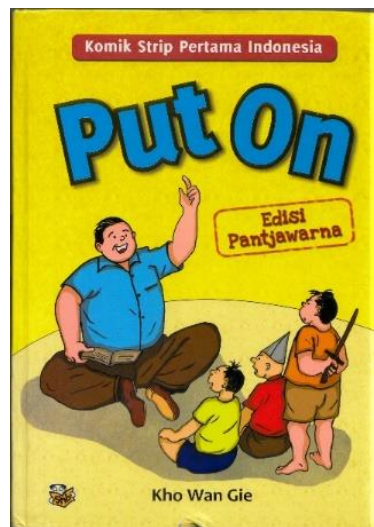
*Peranakan Tionghoa*, as an ethnic group in Indonesia, have been adopted various aspects of the surrounding cultures. This process of assimilation leads them to often be unfamiliar with the Chinese language, instead they are using Malay, Sundanese, Javanese, or Indonesian language in their daily conversations. In adopting local culture, *peranakan Tionghoa* people may change their names and embrace religions such as Islam, aligning themselves with the practices of the surrounding community (Onghokham, 2017:29).

From the discussion about the narrative, the comic medium, the background of the cartoonist, and the *peranakan Tionghoa* ethnicity in Indonesia, this research aims to explore techniques to create character design, situations, and backgrounds in the comic can influence readers' perceptions of *peranakan Tionghoa* in Indonesia. Through this research, it is hoped to develop methods for creating comic narratives that represent the identity of Chinese-Indonesian communities, fostering a sense of sympathy and empathy among readers from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method in the form of multimodal analysis, which includes social semiotics and narrative inquiry. The multimodal text analysis method involves observing the communication elements present in a medium. This approach encompasses the observation of the formation of social semiotic meanings. The stages examined in the observation include representational meaning, compositional meaning, and interpersonal meaning. Representational meaning involves the meanings represented in an image. Compositional meaning refers to the observation of how images are arranged. Interpersonal meaning relates to how an image can stimulate thoughts or ideas in an individual. (R. Kress, 2010:89). Representational meaning is derived from the drawing style, character gestures, and background imagery. Composition is understood through the content of the panels and how they are arranged, while interpersonal meaning is obtained through interviews with readers. In observing the *Put On* comic, the focus is primarily on explaining representational and interpersonal meanings. For example, in this comic, representational meaning is evident in gestures such as Put On clenching his fists when meeting someone older.

In the multimodal analysis conducted on the *Put On* comic, the elements examined include character design (clothing style, drawing style, character gestures), situational depiction, and background images. The research focuses on the compilation of the *Put On* comic strip in the *Pantjwarna* edition, which was republished in 2015. This compilation consists of 285 pages and was published by PT. Suara Harapan Bangsa in collaboration with Pustaka Klasik.



**Figure 1.** The Cover of Put On Comic Strip Compilation, Pantjawarna Edition

After exploring the meanings contained within the comic, the narrative inquiry method is used to understand the interpersonal meaning, which involves the reading experience of the *Put On* comic. This is also compared to the experiences of individuals who have interacted with or have been part of the *peranakan Tionghoa* community in Indonesia. From the interview results, it was observed that the informants had differing perspectives based on factors such as age and reading experience—ranging from those encountering *Put On* for the first time to those who had previously read it. After the data was collected, the audio recordings of each informant were transcribed and reviewed to capture details such as tone and pauses made during the interviews. From the transcripts, similar, connected, or contrasting points among the informants were identified and used as material for further analysis, which was then linked to the literature review.

The narrative inquiry method is a technique for collecting stories from informants, which are then organized into information about various phenomena or situations. This method consists of three main stages. The first stage is the formation of narrative schemas, which involves creating a framework to analyze images or thought structures. Based on this framework, a set of questions is prepared to pose to the informants. The second stage involves sharing knowledge and experiences from the informants. Finally, the third stage focuses on developing cognitive strategies, which include selecting, comparing, and drawing conclusions from the information obtained from the informants (Jeong Hee, 2016:89)

In the research process, the narrative inquiry method was employed over a duration of 60 to 90 minutes. At the outset, the researcher provided the “Put On” comic, specifically the *Pantjawarna* edition, to the informants and allocated 15 to 30 minutes for them to read its content. Following the reading phase, the researcher conducted interviews, asking the informants questions based on several key points. These included the significance of the “Put On” comic to a diverse audience in Indonesia, encompassing both the *Peranakan Tionghoa* community and those from non-*Peranakan* backgrounds. The comic effectively highlights aspects of *Peranakan Tionghoa* identity that leave a lasting impression through its nuanced storytelling and cultural representation. Additionally, it reflects situations and cultural practices that remain relevant in contemporary society, creating a bridge between past and present. Embedded within its narratives are Indonesian values, seamlessly interwoven into the comic’s themes, emphasizing the interplay between individual identity and national culture.

In the interview process of the narrative inquiry method, a total of six informants were obtained. The details of the informants based on age, gender, and profession are as follows:

1. Informant A: 57 years old, male, and works as a lecturer.
2. Informant B: 59 years old, female, and works as a lecturer.
3. Informant C: 35 years old, male, and works as a lecturer and graphic designer.
4. Informant D: 49 years old, male, and works as a lecturer.
5. Informant E: 29 years old, female, and is a student.
6. Informant F: 30 years old, female, and works as a lecturer.

In the research, the informants were selected because they have a particular interest in and habit of observing pop culture products, such as comics. This familiarity makes them well-suited to express their opinions about the content of the *Put On* comic.

Among the six informants, those with a background as *peranakan Tionghoa* are Informants B, C, and F, while Informants A, D, and E do not have a *peranakan Tionghoa* background but frequently interact with that ethnic group. All informants reside in the capital city of Jakarta, which was chosen because Jakarta is included in the urban criteria and comics are an urban culture

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Cultural Struggles in the Comic *Put On*

The representation of meaning in the character design of *Put On* can be observed through the clothing worn by the characters. The choice of formal attire, such as tuxedos, is indicative of western fashion, particularly in special situations. The comic also portrays *Put On*'s love interest dressed in western-style clothing, which can be associated as the beauty standards. Furthermore, it is noticeable that individuals in positions of authority or those considered high-ranking also wear Western attire. This emphasis on Western clothing suggests that western culture was dominant and viewed as ideal during the time the *Put On* comic was created.



Figure 2. Put On wears western style clothing.



Figure 3. Clothing style of women in family member

In everyday life, the urban setting where Put On resides is reflected in his casual attire, consisting of T-shirts and shirts. However, when depicting supporting characters from his close family, such as his mother, sisters, and older relatives, the clothing worn is *kebaya*. The family's clothing does not showcase traditional Chinese styles; instead, the language used is a mix of Malay and Hokkien. The Chinese attire is primarily worn by the older generation, specifically Put On's grandfather.



Figure 4. Greeting gesture and clothing style of elders

### Body Language, Food, and Family System in the Comic *Put On*

Put On's body language reflects the *peranakan* culture, particularly the customs associated with the Chinese community. For instance, he greets older individuals by bowing and clasping his hands, a gesture of respect. However, in the story, when Put On meets his friends, he does not employ the bowing gesture with his peers. Instead, when meeting friends of the same age, Put On adopts Western-style greetings, such as hugging and shaking hands. In the background of the panel where Put On meets his friends, we can also observe that all of his friends, both male and female, are dressed in Western-style clothing. Through their choice of Western attire in social settings, which also signifies social status, it is evident that the Chinese Peranakan tended to follow the cultural hegemony surrounding them. This could be due to an identity anxiety stemming from the Dutch-imposed distinction between *Totok* and *Peranakan* (Onghokham, 2017). However, this also shows that the Peranakan community was open to mingling with people of various ethnicities and exploring their cultural products.

Additionally, the *Put On* comic also features various foods, their presentation, and the types of dishes consumed. Food presentation refers to how the food is served. In *Put On*, meals are served with an array of dishes laid out for communal dining, with rice placed in a basket on a rectangular table. Instead of using chopsticks, which are commonly associated

with Chinese dining, Put On consumes the food using a spoon and fork. The food that appears also a mix of Indonesian and Chinese snacks, variety of dishes includes *bacang*, *tong chupia*, *ketupat*, and *combro*. Although, Chinese food is the food that particularly highlighted during special celebrations, such as *Peh Cun* and *Cap Go Meh*.

The matrilineal system is evident in how Put On's mother gives instructions and asserts dominance within the comic. In the families of Put On's friends, it is also shown that husbands tend to be submissive to their wives. This matrilineal system among the *peranakan Tionghoa* community in Indonesia contrasts with the more patriarchal structure of the *totok* Chinese (pure bred Chinese), where the father is positioned as the primary decision-maker (Onghokham, 2017:28). Evidence of the matrilineal system in the *Put On comic, Pantjwarna edition*, can be observed through the absence of any discussion or depiction of the father figure throughout the narrative.

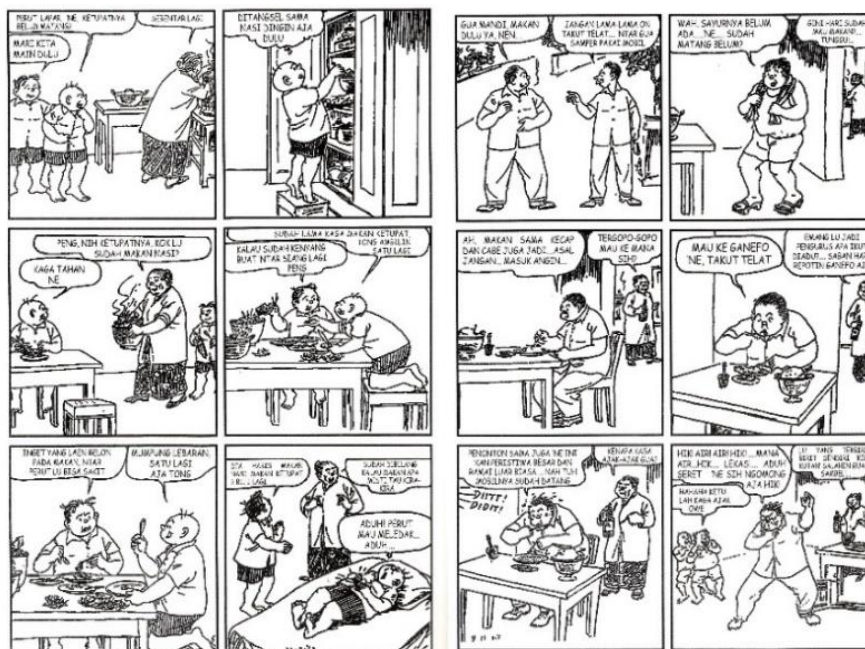


Figure 5. Dining scene in the comic Put On

### Put On's Character Design and The Changing of Era

Through the interviews conducted, it became evident that all informants agreed that the illustration style of the *Put On* comic gives the impression of being created in an American style, drawing references or similarities to George Magnus, regardless of the comic artist's educational background. Informant E, upon first reading *Put On*, noted that they did not perceive any elements explicitly indicating a *peranakan Tionghoa* identity in Indonesia; instead, they associated the style with characteristics typically linked to Chinese art. The use of Western elements in *Put On* reflects the social strata of urban society at the time, where the Dutch, as colonial rulers, implemented policies that heavily influenced societal norms.

Informant F further explained that if one does not pay attention to the language used, several stories within *Put On* do not represent the *peranakan Tionghoa* identity at all. If *Put On's* character is removed from the social context depicted in the comic panels, there are no elements of the *peranakan* identity that can be recognized. This includes the character design

of the character Put On, which does not reflect the physical characteristics typical of the *peranakan TiongHoa* community.

Visual understanding of the *peranakan* story background is gleaned from the clothing of supporting characters and the projection of activities that *Put On* experiences. However, the perception that Put On embodies a mischievous and humorous personality is evident in his large physical design, which does not convey a menacing appearance.

In Informant B's perception, the character design of Put On actually influences the *peranakan TiongHoa* community. The stereotype of *peranakan TiongHoa* individuals being portrayed as overweight and foolish, like Put On, often serves as a source of ridicule. Informant B shared a personal anecdote about having a mischievous, overweight *peranakan TiongHoa* neighbor who was often referred to as "Put On," a nickname that left a lasting impression on their childhood. This is because the comic *Put On* was once a popular cultural product among the *peranakan TiongHoa* community. However, as it is no longer part of popular culture today, it has ceased to be a source of ridicule.

### ***Peranakan TiongHoa and Loyalty to Indonesian Values***

In the comic *Put On*, the informants agreed that the character's traits do not adequately represent the *peranakan TiongHoa* identity. According to Informants E and F, *Put On*'s tendency to play with young children in his neighborhood is not reflective of how a *peranakan TiongHoa* man typically behaves, as they are generally perceived to be more reserved with younger individuals. Instead, *Put On*'s friendly and humorous demeanor seems to represent other ethnic groups in Indonesia. However, it should be noted that respondent E lacks knowledge regarding the classification of Chinese-Indonesians into "*peranakan*" and "*totok*", thus viewing the Chinese-Indonesian identity in a generalized manner.

Informant E appreciates Put On's ability to blend in naturally with those around him. This perspective is reinforced by Informant C, who comes from a *peranakan TiongHoa* background, and who stated that Put On's traits signify an individual's comfort with their surroundings, allowing for open communication without maintaining distance. In his ability to integrate and his courage to confront differences, Put On embodies values of Indonesian identity that resonate with the *peranakan TiongHoa* community.

According to Informant A, Put On's Indonesian identity is reflected in his involvement in events and phenomena occurring in Indonesia. For example, his attention to the GANEFO (Games of the New Emerging Forces) sports festival in 1963 and his stance against NEKOLIM (neocolonialism and imperialism) demonstrate this, even though his clothing style and preferences suggest Western influences. From interview with Informant A after conducting a literature review, it becomes clear that the *peranakan* community experienced a crisis of identity. In 1950, following the enactment of the Citizenship Law in 1946 and the Round Table Conference Agreement (KMB), Chinese citizens who did not declare their nationality initially automatically became Indonesian citizens. However, in 1954, the passive citizenship recognition system shifted to an active one, requiring Chinese Indonesians to declare their nationality as Indonesian citizens. If they failed to do so, their descendants were considered foreign nationals in Indonesia (Suryadinata, 1984)

The statement that one is an Indonesian citizen, aside from administrative proof of being born in Indonesia and the official rejection of Chinese nationality, was indirectly demonstrated through the willingness and participation in supporting Indonesian



government programs. Informant A also noted that the language used in *Put On* serves as evidence of national unity, a characteristic that has existed even before Indonesia's independence.

### **Relevance of the Environment and Life Situations of *Peranakan Tionghoa* in the Current Era.**

In the visualization of social conditions in *Put On*, Informants D and E noted that the life of the *peranakan Tionghoa* community in Indonesia is portrayed as more open and integrated with society. This is evidenced by the design of homes without closed fences, allowing neighbors to engage freely with one another. In his interactions with neighbors, *Put On* is seen as quite friendly, participating in communal activities and neighborhood clean-ups. Additionally, he takes the initiative to visit and introduce himself to new neighbors..

The openness and relationships of the *peranakan Tionghoa* community depicted in *Put On* are not solely attributed to inter-ethnic interactions in Indonesia; however cultural changes in urban areas can lead to a more individualistic society. The impression of individuality or exclusivity displayed by Chinese-Indonesians (*peranakan Tionghoa*) in the current era can also be attributed to trauma and conflicts, particularly due to the ethnic violence in 1998. However, tensions between ethnic groups and such exclusivity saw a recovery in the 2000s, facilitated by legal reforms following political shifts, especially during the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid.

President Abdurrahman Wahid, through Presidential Decree No. 6 of 2000, replaced Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967, which previously prohibited the Chinese ethnic group from engaging in cultural activities such as festivals, holidays, art practices, and language. This shift led to the renewed acceptance of *peranakan Tionghoa* culture in society, marked by the re-allowance of celebrations like Lunar New Year (Imlek), Cap Go Meh, and the recognition of Confucianism (Kong Fu Cu) as a religion in Indonesia. As a result, the Peranakan community was able to engage more freely in public spaces, a change brought about by President Abdurrahman Wahid's policies.

Additionally, the influence of East Asian popular culture has contributed to the broader acceptance of Peranakan culture, especially in areas such as beauty standards, culinary tastes, and fashion styles. Through popular culture, Indonesian society has been able to connect values from Confucian beliefs, such as hard work and devotion to ancestors and superiors in the workplace, with Islamic values. Ultimately, this connection aligns with the idea that one will be rewarded with both spiritual merit and material recognition, such as social mobility (Heryanto, 2015). However, at the same time, East Asian popular culture has also led to a distortion of cultural identity among the younger generation of Chinese-Indonesians. This is because, in detail, the cultures of East Asia—such as traditional Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cultures—differ significantly from the Peranakan Chinese culture in Indonesia.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The world-building in the comic stimulates the readers' sense of empathy. Through the visual representation of the comic strip, it captures the phenomena of a particular era, allowing readers of *Put On* to understand the conditions between the 1930s and 1960s. In representing the *peranakan Tionghoa* identity within *Put On*, research shows that this identity is not derived from *Put On*'s character design but rather from everything surrounding the main character. The character design of *Put On* is simplistic, indicating only the traits of the character without reflecting the cultural background he possesses. This is

further emphasized by the drawing style in *Put On*, which draws references from American styles.

From the findings of the research, it can be concluded that when portraying a cultural identity, it is not necessary for a main character to be heavily marked with overt cultural symbols. A strong cultural presence can create a visual aroma that may not evoke curiosity among a broader readership. In presenting a main character that stimulates readers from various backgrounds, the strategy employed is the use of "odorless culture," as noted in *Japanese Visual Culture : Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime* by Mark W. Williams in 2008. In this context, *Put On* actually has the potential to explore other cultures present in Indonesia beyond those found in Jakarta, as its design allows it to blend seamlessly with the surrounding environment.

In conveying a culture, if a character lacks the traits, symbols, or physical characteristics of an ethnic group, it becomes essential to closely observe the environment and the situation surrounding the character's living conditions. Such observations can be made both, with direct observation and through the personal experiences of the comic's creator. In the case of *Put On*, it is crucial that the supporting characters are imbued with strong cultural elements, such as their style of clothing, naming conventions, speech patterns, and the language they use.

Beyond the design aspects of the character *Put On*, it can also be observed that defining a society, particularly the *peranakan TiongHoa* community, amid changing times cannot rely solely on genetics. Instead, it encompasses habits, important celebrations or events, and the values and norms upheld within a community. This is increasingly relevant due to the diverse interethnic marriages that have emerged, especially as a result of the acceleration of information flow and transportation.

In the face of changes and the acceleration of information and technology, the definition of the *peranakan TiongHoa* community in Indonesia encounters numerous challenges, particularly due to the political interests of those in power. The *peranakan TiongHoa* struggle for recognition as genuine members of Indonesian society, often feeling caught in a position of "betweenness," as they are sometimes not acknowledged as authentic descendants of the Chinese. This lack of clear roots complicates their identity. Additionally, they face new challenges stemming from cultural shifts influenced by popular culture from other countries, which threaten to overshadow and potentially erase the unique cultural heritage of the *peranakan TiongHoa* in Indonesia.

From the struggles faced, the fight of the *peranakan TiongHoa* ethnic group in Indonesia emerges as a new cultural root, unique and distinct from *peranakan TiongHoa* in other countries. As the *peranakan TiongHoa* community gains recognition and their culture is preserved in Indonesia, it fosters a sense of confidence, love for the homeland, and a sense of purpose for future generations.

Research on the *Put On* comic is expected to inspire the creation of narratives within comics that explore the background and identity of the comic artist. Comics, or art in general, can function as cultural artifacts. Art as a cultural artifact plays a role in preserving identity and understanding complex phenomena that occurred in previous generations (Agatha et al., 2022).

Following the research on the *Put On* comic, it is recommended to conduct further studies using similar cultural artifacts. Observations can be carried out by comparing Indonesian values in comics created by *peranakan* comic artists, such as Ganes TH in his work *Si Buta dari Gua Hantu* or Hans Jaladra (alias Liem Tjong Han and Rianto Sukandi) in his work *Panji Tengkorak* (Ajidarma, 2011). In works such as *Si Buta dari Gua Hantu*

and *Panji Tengkorak*, although they belong to different genres—action and fantasy—it is possible to observe how the comic artists express their views on national ideals and issues through the depiction of story introductions, conflicts, and the suggested resolutions they offer. Although a literature review has been conducted, covering expert opinions on *peranakan* culture, the research could be enhanced by including interviews with key informants from the *peranakan* community, such as the chairman of the Chinese-Indonesian association. This would provide a deeper perspective on Chinese-Indonesian culture.

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