

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Problem

Indonesian society has been through various conflicts and violence based on ethnicity, religion, as well as economic issues throughout its history. The May 1998 Riots, which occurred prior to the fall of the New Order Regime in 1998, was a serious tragedy experienced by the Indonesians, especially by the Chinese-Indonesians. But it was not the only major riots and violence that this minority group had gone through. Notably, long before the May 1998 Riots happened, the same goes with what happened during the New Order in 1965 where everything that was related to China was strictly restricted by the government; Chinese-Indonesians were emboldened to pursue a career in business and became successful businessmen, however that led to negative perceptions toward the Chinese-Indonesians by the locals (Herlijanto, 2016). For that reason, the Chinese-Indonesians are in doubt of their identity and belonging (Wang, 2000).

The population of the Chinese in Indonesia forms about 3 percent of the total population in Indonesia (Sai and Hoon, 2013). As Setijadi (2016) specified that Chinese-Indonesians have the access to represent and participate in politics now, it does not mean that it is easy for them to escape from racial discrimination. As for this, Chinese-Indonesians are still the minorities in Indonesia and no matter what actions that they take wrongly, they would be dishonored. This view comes from the outcome that there is a

significant distinction in terms of business factors between the Chinese-Indonesians and the locals, thus social jealousy developed where protests were made by the locals to against the government policies that were beneficial to the Chinese-Indonesians (Thung, 2000). Thus, no matter what the Chinese-Indonesians do or how upright they are, they will always be incorrect and then discriminated against (Dawis, 2009). In addition, a social construction of Chinese-Indonesians as ‘non-*pribumi*’ (non-native) was also introduced during the colonial era in 1965 when the ethnic Chinese were racially categorized as ‘foreign Orientals’ by the Dutch to refer them as the high-societal class compared to the locals (Setijadi, 2013).

The May 1998 Riots attracted much attention across the world. It was portrayed and reported that many companies and properties owned by the Chinese-Indonesians were demolished and burned. However, authority took place which the media were heavily absorbed in the capital yet cases about ethnic Chinese women who were publicly gang-raped were not immediately taken care of (Coppel, 2006), it only began to appear in the print media almost a month later (Sai, 2006). This event is very horrifying which among them (ethnic Chinese women) were little girls, teenagers; some were not seriously injured but might already be pregnant; some have extreme dilemma crisis about what they should do with their pregnancy; and those who did not happen to be pregnant experienced psychological trauma that would torment them for life (Sidharta, 2000). Ita Fatia Nadia, a senior Indonesian feminist and human rights activist today, was one of the witnesses who saw and

received continuous reports of those women in extreme life crisis, all over cities in Indonesia. The May 1998 turmoil revolved in extensive lootings and destructions of properties, malicious gang-rape of ethnic Chinese women in major cities of Indonesia, yet the fact-finding team was not able to bring the perpetrators to justice because the team was being told that they lacked evidences (Sai, 2006).

Setijadi (2013) stated that the majority of Chinese-Indonesians have been living in the present with traumatic pasts because no perpetrator of racialized violence against the ethnic Chinese has been brought to justice. Momentarily, the Chinese-Indonesians youth must have been dealing with loads of mutual trauma across the generations that have been passed down from their parents' and grandparents' memories that they always have to 'watch out' of the locals. On the brighter side, Chinese-Indonesian youths did not experience the May 1998 Riots directly compared to their parents' pasts where they had no choice but to bury or erase those terrifying memories. For all that, it does not mean that these youths are not experiencing any trauma and confusion, they might have been thinking over all the histories that were passed down to them and determining what action they should take to their own lives (Setijadi, 2013). As the globalization era takes place, the youths now have more freedom and the access to express their voices and opinions politically and socially through advanced channels such as art, music, film, and modern technology - in order to spread the awareness and gain wider audiences' attention from around the world. One example that has been released by a

Chinese-Indonesian woman named Rani Pramesti, was a digital graphic novel titled the “Chinese Whispers” that can be accessed online through a web site, which basically talks about Rani Pramesti and other Chinese women’s personal perceptions to the May 1998 Riots. Rani Pramesti said on *Vice* that there are some people who shared their problems that they were told by their parents to delete their posts about the “Chinese Whispers” on Facebook (Senanayake, 2018), which indirectly indicates that the trauma is still shared between generations. Also, on a *webinar* (an online seminar) that was held by *Roemah Bhinneka* on 28th September 2020, Rani Pramesti was one of the speakers on the *webinar* and stated, “our identity - Chinese-Indonesians - is always being at issue here”.

The “Chinese Whispers” was initially a performance installation that investigated racialized violence that happened during the May 1998 Riots in Indonesia. This performance was first introduced at the Melbourne Fringe Festival 2014 and has won the Best Live Art. The audiences went along the journey through a mesmerizing world of white cloth and indicating it as a maze, together with Rani Pramesti narrating her story towards the May 1998 Riots as the audio. Then in 2018, Rani Pramesti and her team “Rani P Collaborations” generated the “Chinese Whispers” into a bilingual, digital graphic novel that can be accessed through the website ‘www.thechinesewhispers.com’ in order to gain wider audiences globally and spread their key message, which is ‘We cannot heal what we will not face’.

1.2 Identification of the Problem

Mass communication can be transferred through mass media, in order to reach a large audience (West & Turner, 2014). With the presence of mass media, people are able to lift social interaction (McQuail, 2010). This gives an opportunity for those individuals who wanted to make a movement politically or socially, and in hope to reach their audiences worldwide. Mass media has progressed very much from written to print media to electronic media and as Griffin (2015) stated that if only Marshall McLuhan was still here today, he would have discovered that the digital age is shifting the present. Flew (2014) stated that the rise of new media was ushered with the arrival of the Internet. One feature of new media is interactivity that allows users to be active, instead of other old media that does not really engage audiences to be active (Flew, 2014).

With globalization evolving now, it is widely known that everyone has free access to advanced media such as the new media to spread awareness to the public worldwide; and as according to McQuail (2010), “the new media are widely thought to be accelerating the process of globalization”. As already mentioned, there are still some Chinese-Indonesians, either they are the old generations or the youths, they must have been carrying trauma and confusion on them about the May 1998 Riots. Ulung (2018) on the *Jakartpost.com* once said that the history is the past, present, and future, the historical violence might be painful, but we need to know in order to not repeat the same conflicts and violence. Many youths have not known about

the May 1998 tragedy intensively and some of them are also not able to speak up or grieve for the May 1998 victims, said Rani Pramesti during the *webinar*. Ita Fatia Nadia, also said during the *webinar*, “Our job here is to start making a historical movement that could provide justice from the victims’ voices” - simply, she is trying to imply that in order for this movement to begin, victims should speak up now and their voices should be heard. Individuals who have engaged themselves into such an organization or community are usually able to critically recall, revise, and negotiate views of past in order to fit in to the current situations (Setijadi, 2013), thus with the presence of new media today they are able to stand and speak up about their lingering fears and aspirations for the better community.

For that reason, the producer of the “Chinese Whispers”, Rani Pramesti, decided to generate her performance illustration into an online graphic novel, in order to reach wider and global audiences so that they are aware of the issue. Here, Rani Pramesti is hoping that her creation would help the youths to learn about historical information and to be able to create a community, especially for the younger generations that are willing to talk about the complex and displeasing condition - she wants to give rise about social change (Vice, 2018).

Rani Pramesti is a Jakarta-born ethnic Chinese artist who moved to Australia, when she was 12 years old, after the May 1998 Riots. Also, this digital graphic novel could not be achieved without the illustrations by Cindy Saja (TheJakartaPost, 2018). This online graphic novel consists of six

chapters that uses a combination of illustrations, animations, and audio, within a 35 minute presentation. Aside from Rani Pramesti's personal story, *Chinese Whispers* also talks about Indonesia's political and economic context in 1998, women's perspectives (Indo-Australian) towards the May 1998 Riots, and Indonesia's history about ethnicities segregation since the Dutch colonial era in 1965. In addition, Rani Pramesti came out with this idea when she realized that there are still people who do not believe that the sexual violence against Chinese-Indonesian women did actually happen. Rani Pramesti also wanted to share and spread her story to heal those wounds and the ones that are traumatized by the pasts (Vice, 2018). The title, "Chinese Whispers" was originated from the popular children's game that is played across schoolyards, and then Rani Pramesti referred that title to the Indonesians ethnic Chinese who want to talk about the riots in a 'near-whisper quietness' (TheJakartaPost, 2018).

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Based on the background and the identification of the problem that has been explained above, the researcher came up with a research question:

"What does the digital graphic novel titled "Chinese Whispers" mean for the Indonesian youths?"

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze and find out what does the digital graphic novel titled "Chinese Whispers" mean for the Indonesian youths after watching it.

1.5 Significance of the Study,

a. Academic Purpose

As for the academic purpose, this study is useful for the development of research in the communication field, especially about racial and violence issues in Indonesia. This research also gives reference to other communication scholars who want to do research in the field of new media, especially digital graphic novel, for future research.

b. Social Purpose

In social terms, this research gives information and guidelines for groups or communities, especially Indonesian youths, who want to create campaigns or awareness about racial and violence issues through the new media.

1.6 Organization of the Study

This research consists of six chapters, which can be elaborated as below:

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In chapter one, the researcher will explain about the introduction of the research, which consists of background, identification of the problem, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study and the organization of the study.

CHAPTER II: RESEARCH OBJECT

In chapter two, the researcher will explain about the research object, which consists of details about the object of the study and the subject of the study. The object of the study is the digital graphic novel titled “Chinese

Whispers”, and the subject of the study is the audience of the digital graphic novel, who are Indonesian youths.

CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, it will consist of the explanation of the theories and important concepts that are used in the making of this research.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter the researcher will describe what methodology is used in this research. This research uses a qualitative approach and will be explained in detail. The researcher will also explain the data sources, data analysis, sources, and the reliability and validity of the data obtained.

CHAPTER V: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In chapter five, the researcher will describe the results of the findings, as well as detailed analysis of the information and data that are acquired during the data collection process.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Chapter six is the final chapter that the researcher will be stating the conclusion of the research and give suggestions for future research that has a similar topic or field of study.