Chinese Culture Survival
As One of Local Wisdom In Indonesia Modern Society
In Clara Ng’s *Dimsum Terakhir*

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Abstract

*Chinese culture is the one of many unique cultures that is exist in Indonesia. Since the Chinese people spread in almost every continent in the world, the culture itself is also keep maintained. As we know that culture has all the values, norms, social structure and so on that distinguishes a certain society from the others. In this novel, the modernization has impacted the lifestyle of these quadruple sisters. So whatever the reason, they all try hard to defend their “being” by maintaining the culture of their origin, of course, try to preserve the Chinese culture itself all at once, to show their obedience to their dying father. It is our duty to keep the truth inside of those norms and values, so that we could give a clear explanation to the others about our original culture. And people could understand who we are from what is our tradition. Sometimes, culture gives us a dignity and identity. No surprised if some races in the world are easy to be distinguished or to be recognized from their appearance or their customs. That is why we need to preserve our nation’s culture. Start from ourselves, that is to preserve our local culture first. Little things could change a lot if we do it solemnly. And I believe that this story is like a ‘guide’ to everyone. A good guide to Indonesian who is nowadays more like to imitate the Western culture than to maintain their own culture. We must follow the Chinese-inherited people in this novel who still have a willing to respect their ancestor by preserved their original culture.*

*Keywords:* Culture, local wisdom, modern society, social values.

I. Introduction

In the modern society as example in Jakarta as metropolis, a culture is quite hard to be maintained. The Jakarta people, which has a special tradition and culture that called Betawi culture, have realised that they almost lost their own original culture because there are many influences that have entered the city.

That is why I want to discuss about the issue that appeared on the Clara Ng’s *Dimsum Terakhir.* That is how the Chinese-inherited people, the minority one in Jakarta, try to maintain their tradition within the modern lifestyle and their business in everyday, keep their tradition with their life and how the Chinese-inherited people sincerely try to fulfill the quite unique processions of worship as the effort to preserve their original culture that distinguishes them from the others and also makes Chinese-inherited people as the unique society in Indonesia.
Chinese culture is one of many unique cultures that have existed in Indonesia. Since the Chinese people spread in almost every continent in the world, the culture itself is also kept maintained. As we know that culture has all the values, norms, social structure and so on that distinguishes a certain society from the others. As Andreas Eppink said:

“Culture contents all the values, norms, knowledges, and the whole social structure, religious, etc. And also all intellectual statements and artistics that distinguish a certain society from the others” (Eppink: http://www.budaya-tionghoa.org/

As written in this novel, the modernization has impacted the lifestyle of these quadruple sisters. They are living in a different point of view so that it causes a different style, different choice to live. But the thing that never changes is their blood of being Chinese. So whatever the reason, they all try hard to defend their “being” by maintain the culture of their origin, of course, try to preserve the Chinese culture itself all at once, to show their obedience to their dying father.

II. Culture and Sociology

The cultural issue that is appeared in “Dimsum Terakhir” contains a lot of knowledge that we might not know before. Clara Ng’s did not describe them in detail, but she implied several aspects of Chinese culture in some sections of her novel. So that we could understand the Chinese culture in general. Not in detail. I try to use some theories to analyse the issue in Ng’s “Dimsum Terakhir”. First, I use Culture Theory to know about culture, specially the culture of Chinese people itself. And the second is Sociology Theory. I use this theory to know the motivation of this quadruple’s activities. In this case, their activities to maintain the culture, meanwhile they were busy with their own career in the modern life.

2.1. Culture Theory

Definition of Culture

Culture is derived from the Latin cultura stemming from colere, meaning "to cultivate,. There are many definitions of culture because one person and the other always have a different point of view about what is culture and how to understand it literally. But this is the brief definition of culture itself:

“Generally culture refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance. Different definitions of "culture" reflect different theoretical bases for understanding, or criteria for evaluating, human activity.”(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/culture)

Culture is manifested in music, literature, painting and sculpture, theater and film and other things. Although some people identify culture in terms of consumption and consumer goods (as in high culture, low culture, folk culture, or popular culture to the social relationships and practices in which such objects and processes become embedded. For them, culture thus includes technology, art, science, as well as moral systems.

Then, the theory has a simple meaning as a symbolic construction (Kaplan, 296:1964). But the broad meaning of theory is:
“Serangkaian hipotesis/preposisi yang saling berhubungan tentang suatu gejala ataupun banyak gejala.” (Sarwono, 5:2002)

“A bunch of hypothesis/preposition that is connected each other, about one phenomenon or many “

So, the definition of culture theory is a bunch of hypothesis/preposition that is connected each other, about one phenomenon or many phenomena about patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activities significance and importance.

2.2. Sociology Theory

Definition of Sociology

Sociology is derived from the Latin *socius*, means friend, companion, or together. And *logos*, means science. But the real definition of sociology is a science about how to live in a society, and studying the life of people/human in his society. Or we could say that sociology is a scientific study of society.

“Sociology is the systematic and scientific study of society, including patterns of social relationships, social action, and culture. As an academic discipline, sociology is most often considered as a branch of social science also identified as a behavioral science.” (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/sociology)

I use this theory to help me to analyze the issue I took is because it has a near relation with the theme I will discuss about. It is about relationship between human, their environment/society which is having difference tradition from their origin culture, and how they cope that with their own way. As the purpose of the sociology itself, to study the action of human.

“Tujuan dari ilmu sosiologi adalah untuk mempelajari tingkah laku manusia sebagai bagian dari lingkungan terbatas, seperti keluarga, desa, atau masyarakat di suatu wilayah tertentu, dan sebagainya.” (Sarwono, 4:2002)

“The purpose of sociology is to study the action of human as a part of a limited environment, such as (in) family, village, or society in a certain region, etc.”

III. The Application of Cultural Survival in Dimsum Terakhir

Cultural survival here means a cultural practice that has lost its pure function but it is still exist in the society. As Sulaeman said in his book “Ilmu Budaya Dasar, Suatu Pengantar”

“Cultural survival adalah suatu praktek budaya yang telah kehilangan fungsi pentingnya 100 persen, tapi tetap ada dan hidup berlaku di
masyarakat semata-mata hanya berlandaskan atas adat istiadat semata” (Sulaeman, 29:1988)

“Cultural survival is a cultural practice that has lost its pure function 100 percent, but still exists and valid in society merely based on tradition/custom”

The action of surviving culture itself is also related to the motivation of this quadruple. All at once they fulfill father’s want as a general culture on every traditions in the most countries in the world. This action in sociology is called, social action. Definition of social action according to Maryati and Suryawati in their book is:

“Tindakan sosial merupakan implementasi dari ciri budaya yang dianut. Apabila tindakan tersebut dilestarikan maka akan menjadi suatu kebiasaan. Tindakan sosial adalah tindakan manusia yang mempengaruhi/dipengaruhi oleh orang lain atau kelompok manusia.”(Maryati dan Suryawati, 28:2001)

“Social action is an implementation of culture’s characteristic that is attended. When the action is survived, then it would become a custom. Social action is an human’s action that influences or being influenced by the other person or a group of human.”

Their action of surviving the culture is catagorized as a traditional action. Traditional action is also called irational action. Because mostly, it is done only according to the traditon, unconsciously done, and sometimes it is an application of custom in traditional people. The identity of this action based on obedience and usually it is a duty or an obligation for the elderly group. If this action is undone, the person whom is attend it will have a regret because most practices have moral value and contain the truth.(Maryati and Suryawati, 2001)

Such as written in page 169. When Novera, the last daughter in this quadruple, is cleaning the worship table. Eventhough she is a Catholic, and she did not attend the traditional Chinese belief anymore like her sisters do, she is still have a willing to clean it. Because some Chinese people believe that worship table is sacred. It is a place where hio or incense is burnt. In Chinese tradition, burning hio is ike a prayer to God. In order to get His protection and if she did not intend to pray, at least it is the way to thank God for His grace and love to her family.(Koentjaraningrat, 353:2002)

And the second effort of this quadruple to survive the tradition is they obey the rule that every 1st day(called Ce Il) and 15th day (called Cap Go) in Lunar calendar, they are not allowed to eat any meat(pg. 154).Though, only Novera who is succeed to survive that custom and her sisters not. Because she thought that tradition is still a tradition, however the time will goes by.

At the page 163, the other sisters, Indah and Rosi were busy to looking for an traditional medicine for their father as the alternative of the modern medicine that they have done to heal him. In this case, they took their father to the hospital for getting a
proper medicinal therapy from the doctor. They decided to search China medicine, based on experience on their childhood. They were accustomed to consume China medicine everytime they are sick. And they were saved by that. This action comes from the \textit{primary socialization}. It is an action to socialize someone with the custom or tradition that surrounds him which is taught especially by his family. (Maryati and Suryawati, 2001)

Jump to page 221, when Siska and Rosi, visited China temple, Indonesian called it as “Klenteng”. They came there not for doing any worth thing. They just came to find tranquility and the atmosphere silence, where their mind could feel relax and so their heart. They came there to telling the truth of their life. Actually, when people are going to Klenteng, they do not meant to worship or give any devotion to God. People go to Klenteng to wish or beg something to God, it could be grace, prosperity, children, welfare, or maybe salvation. (Koentjaraningrat, 353:2002)

This quadruple’s action is match with the cultural survival theory that has explained above. They are still doing those activities though its pure function has lost. But they did it only to follow the custom and change its original value or function.

IV. Value and Norms of The Common Oriental People in Dimsum Terakhir

As the value and norms, Oriental people’s culture (Chinese culture) have an indirect special institution that regulates the society in order. Every social institution has specific characteristics such as having these part:

1. Symbol
2. Regulation and tradition
3. Long lasting
4. Full-equipped
5. Ideology, and
6. Degree of immunity (Maryati and Suryawati, 2001)

Chinese culture is included in the Eastern tradition. The tradition has formed values and norms that keeps to develop in each society day by day thouh . Every Eastern tradition has a prime source. Its source is all beliefs and religions that borns in East. The value of most Eastern people life is fully comprehend this life itself, and its whole existence not just with their brain. But they prefer to use the intuition than to use their mind and logical thought. Core of their personality is laid in their heart. And to understand life, they should seek a harmony and be united with nature. Because nature has given them everything, they must take care of it with a real action, such as not to exploit the sources from nature. (Sulaeman, 37-39:1988)

In the story, though modernity has influenced the quadruple very much. The values and norms seemed still stand in their place. Inspite of it was losing the original function. They tried to maintain the value as possible as they can. Some values cannot be applied in this era. Such as stated in page 154. All chinese must not eat any meat at the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 15\textsuperscript{th} day at each month of Lunar calendar. Nowadays, it is difficult to find Chinese who is still keep that custom in the family. Even they might be forgot the important days in Lunar calendar. The only day that is still commemorated in general is Imlek day. The day when most Chinese go to Klenteng to thank God. Imlek day in Chinese culture is a festival for welcoming the spring in China as a symbol of ‘raising’
day from the gloomy winter to the light spring season, all at once to celebrate Chinese new year. In the same time, Imlek always happens on the first day of the month (ce it) it means they are not allowed to eat meat, only vegetables. (Koentjaraningrat, 354:2002).

In page 86, we could see that there is unwritten rule that every Chinese should mastered Mandarin language. And Siska felt ashamed because her face is Chinese but she cannot speak in Mandarin language. It refers to the social institution characteristic number two, that in Chinese tradition is also has a regulation, though it is not written, that every Chinese should masters his mother tongue language. Whether it is in Hokkian dialect, Canton, or Khek.

“Siska pun tahu, di belakangnya pasti klien-lien Hong Kong itu bergosip-ria tentang dirinya. Tampang Cina tapi tidak mampu berbahasa Cina,…Hanya orang-orang Cina di Indonesia yang gagap berbahasa Cina….Aduh. Mirisnya.” (Dimsum Terakhir pg. 86)

“Siska knew, in her back those Hong Kong clients are surely gossiping about her. Chinese appearance but could not speak Chinese….Only Indonesian-Chinese that is stummer in speaking Chinese…What a pity.”

Next on page 171, there is another festival on Chinese culture. That is Mooncake Festival or Lantern Festival. Chinese people usually eat Mooncake and light the lantern. That festival is held to symbolize the united family. Family is a unity and it is very important to all Chinese. Family is complete and inseparable. So it is symbolized by mooncake. It refers to social institution number one. Has a symbol.


“Mooncake Festival. Or sometimes called Lantern Festival. Everywhere is celebrated by eating mooncake – cake that has shape as full circle….That celebration is held to symbolizes a family union. Round as the full moon, that is a family should be”

And then at the page 200-202 has told us about the ideology and state of mind in Chinese people that offspring is very important. They will do anything to get the offspring from his own blood. The ego as Chinese was challenged. So Nung Atasana here (father of the quadruple) did anything to get what he wanted. Incuding to put some pictures and statue of children at his house according to the fengshui. As a father, he is responsible to continue the family clan and take care of his family to preserve his own dignity as a Chinese. This point is refers to the characteristics number five. That is each culture has an ideology.

Then at page 325, there is another norm in Chinese culture. That is, they must respect their ancestor. Because death ends up the life, but it cannot cut the relationship. In this case is the family relationship. However many things could change, but this
should be preserved to continue the culture and the truth inside this norm. this norm refers to point number two and six on social institution’s characteristics.

At least the core of all norms and value is shown on the page 340-348. The scene of Nung’s funeral ceremony. It takes a lot of preparations and rituals in Taoism (the traditional belief in China). The last devotion of children to their parents is how to held a proper funeral and ceremony as their parents want. The quadruple is succeed to held the ceremony and as their effort to show how much they love and respect their father. It refers to point number four in social instiution, that each culture is full-equipped.

V. Modernization Impact on The Maintenance of Chinese Culture in Dimsum Terakhir

The last part that I want to analyze in this novel is how modernization has impacted on the maintenance of this culture. As I read that all four of this quadruple has drowned in modern lifestyle with its various problems and intrigues. It is really hard to maintain a culture that comes from our ancestor that lived a thousand years ago and it has to live in sophisticated era like now. The culture is not lost, but not yet still exist in the life of this quadruple.

The change of Chinese culture is the main supporting factor for the way of this culture preservation. As the society grows and many people mingle together in certain area for a long period, they has acculturated and adapted each other. That created a new culture so the original culture changed. If the culture is giving them a benefit, they still keep it. But if it is not, they may leave it. As Kaplan and Manners said in his book Teori Budaya:

“Suatu institusi atau kegiatan budaya dapat dikatakan fungsional bila memberikan andil untuk adaptasi atau persesuaian sistem tertentu. Dan disfungsional jika melemahkan adaptasi”(Kaplan and Manners,82:2002)

“An institution or activity of culture could be considered functional if it gives contribution to adaptation and agreement of certain system. And it is dysfunctional if it weaken adaptation itself”

First evidence in this novel is in the page 70. Chinese-inherited people now are free to choose their religion out of their ancestor’s belief. Like Novera who has chose to be a Catholic.

“Jika mereka tidak sama-sama sepakat tentang satu hal, ayahnya memberikan kelonggaran yang luas bagi Novera untuk memutuskan yang terbaik bagi hidupnya…Ini termasuk ketika dia memutuskan menjadi Katolik.”(Dimsum Terakhir, pg. 70)

“If they are not agree about one thing, her father gives a wide dispensation to Novera to decide what is best for her life… This is including when she decided to be a Catholic.”
Next in page 86. Where Siska conscius that she cannot speak Chinese though in her body flows the blood of Chinese. Not only her who cannot speak Chinese. Many people outside, especially the Chinese-inherited people that is spread worldwide, could not speak Chinese well. Maybe just in passive way. They understand the meaning but they could not speak actively.

“Siska pun tahu, di belakangnya pasti klien-lien Hong Kong itu bergosip-ria tentang dirinya. *Tampang Cina tapi tidak mampu berbahasa Cina,*….Hanya orang-orang Cina di Indonesia yang gagap berbahasa Cina….Aduh.Mirisnya.” (Dimsum Terakhir pg.86)

“Siska knew, in her back those Hong Kong clients are surely gossiping about her. *Chinese appearance but could not speak Chinese*….Only Indonesian-Chinese that is stummer in speaking Chinese…What a pity.”

Then in page 134, the authors explained the impact of modernization on several aspects in modern Chinese-inherited people. Such as to choose a better settlement, the religion, even they could not speak in their origin language.

“Mereka juga lebih menguasai bahasa Indonesia daripada bahasa Mandarin….Mereka telah berpindah agama, kebanyakan menganut Kristen atau Katolik.”(Dimsum Terakhir, pg.134)

“They are also more mastering Indonesia language than Mandarin language…They have changed their religion, mostly become Christian or Catholic.”

Continuosly, in page 98,127,207, and 247 the Eastern culture has changed a lot. This quadruple have their own orientation for their sexuality. The first is about Siska and Indah. Both of them were doing sex before marriage. Siska has a feminism idea in her mind that women should live freely and happy without men. And women should be independent and as tough as men. After her fiancé left her, she became more idealist and strict to her principle. She doesn’t need a man except for having fun. Then the other is Indah, she was trapped into a forbidden love affair with a Catholic priest named Antonius. A priest is not allowed to marry a woman. But he did a big mistake by having sex with Indah, until she is pregnant. Indah has done free sex. The most shocking point is about Rosi, she became a transgender. A lesbian. With many vagaries in her sexual ife that is implied in this novel. Eastern that is famous for its politeness and its sacred norms and values are totally changed in this point. Sexual orientation.

According to Sulaeman the changing is caused of many factors:

“Perubahan kebudayaan terjadi karena beberapa sebab, yaitu dari masyarakat dan kebudayaan itu sendiri. Misalnya karena terjadi perubahan jumlah penduduk. Dan yang kedua adalah dari faktor lingkungan alam dan fisik di tempat mereka hidup. Misalnya, jika kita tinggal di lingkungan yang memudahkan hubungan dengan masyarakat atau budaya lain, maka perubahan akan terjadi dengan cepat.” (Sulaeman, 29:1988)
“Cultural change happened because of several factors, that are from society or the culture itself. For example, the changing of population. And the second is from the factor of environment and physical situation where they have lived. For example, if we live in an environment which is simplify the relationship with the other society or the other culture, so the change will be happened rapidly.”

The modernization that walks in line with the globalization era has succeed to create a new social order. Society seems releasing their life from the local identity.(Salim, 269:2002) This loss caused the inter-personal relationship becomes weak. As this novel told, the daily activities and business are causing this quadruple difficult to be united. Even in the urgent case, like when their father was sick. Here, the maintenance of Chinese culture is not succeed, but not yet failed too. Because modernization has slid the culture maintenance became a marginated thing, and the society tend to prioritize the complicated lifestyle and earn-money activities over that.

VI. Conclusion

After read the whole parts of this novel, the point that we should put in our mind is the importance of maintaining the culture. However the life has changed and transformed us became someone new, we must not leave the custom moreover forget about the norms and values of our own culture. The tradition is still a tradition. It is a part of ourselves that cannot be left in the past and became a stale story and folklore to our next generation in the future. It is our duty to keep the truth inside of those norms and values, so that we could give a clear explanation to the others about our original culture. And people could understand who we are from what is our tradition. Sometimes, culture gives us a dignity and identity. No surprised if some race in the world are easy to distinguish or to recognize from their appearance or their customs.

That is why we need to preserve our nation’s culture. Start from ourselves, that is to preserve our local culture first. Little things could change a lot if we do it solemnly. And I believe that this story is like a ‘guide’ to everyone. A good guide to Indonesian who is nowadays more like to imitate the Western culture than to maintain their own culture. We must follow the Chinese-inherited people in this novel who are still have a willing to respect their ancestor by preserved their original culture. However it is difficult and hard to do. Because nobody will save our culture, if we do not save it by ourselves.
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