

Episode 38: Felix

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

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What does it mean to be Chinese-Indonesian and Catholic in Indonesia, the Netherlands, and the Middle East? In this episode, Felix shares his stories of growing up as a double minority in Jakarta in the 90s, and the various manifestations of racism he experiences in the Netherlands and one country in the Middle East. His story is about the entangled history of identities, leading to situations where people find themselves stuck somewhere in between.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Felix.

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I grew up in Indonesia. I was born in Indonesia. I was actually born to Chinese-Indonesian parents and family which is also a minority in Indonesia. But it's the same like in Thailand or Vietnam or any other Southeast Asian countries: There are always Chinese Vietnamese, Chinese Thai... And I happen to be Chinese-Indonesian. And I also grew up in a Catholic family. So my parents, they're Catholic. And my whole family from my mom's side and my dad's side, they are Catholic. So that's also a minority. So in a sense, I grew up in a double minority environment. But to be honest, I also stuck to... When I went to high school, for instance, I went to a Catholic school. It was started by Dutch priests back in, I don't know, 1927 or something. And even there, Chinese-Indonesians were the majority. So we were, I would say, maybe 80, 90% [Chinese-Indonesians]. And then also 80, 90% Catholic. So in a way, yes, I'm a minority if you look at the context of Indonesia as a country, but given the context of where I lived, I'm not really a minority because all my friends... well, not *all* my friends, but a majority of my friends, are also Chinese-Indonesian. Yeah, that's just the environment I grew up in.

Reflecting a bit about racism, I think when I was young, I was also a perpetrator of racism, right? There's a lot of biases integrated as part of our culture and society. To give you one example, I grew up playing basketball. And in Indonesia, we don't always have indoor courts. We played most of the time in outdoor courts. And as a result of that, of course, I get tanned. And whenever I saw my grandparents, they were like, "Hey, how come you... You have such dark skin." And this dark skin has a negative association towards people who work with labor and get exposed to the sun all the time. And of course, when I was young, I didn't think that was part of racism, right? But the more I grew up and I moved to other countries doing different experiences, I realized that this is an example of just societal biases that we have in Indonesia. And I think it might also be true not only in Indonesia, but also in other countries in Asia.

We also have... I think there's a general perception that, for instance, Indonesian Indonesians are lazier compared to Chinese-Indonesians. But I don't find it true. Because I also have friends who are Indonesian Indonesians and they are *way* smarter, and they work much harder than some of us. So of course, you can always find examples that support or contradict your argument. But to make such a generalization, I think it's just wrong. So these two are some of the examples that... yeah, it's just like... Even from family, right? It's your closest people that you talk to, you learn from them from day one on Earth, and they also have these biases. And I think now, I'm trying to re educate them a little bit when these things happen, like, "Hey, think about this and that. These are biases that may not always be true." At least that's what I'm trying to say [to them].

And it's not only about skin color, but also religion. There are always extremes, right. I happen to know a friend who is very extreme and Catholic, and I don't agree at all with what this person says. But when we talk about extremism, normally it's associated with Muslims, which is unfortunate. Yes, you find of course examples that... for instance, I think now, you see more and more women wearing hijab. But also, they cover their face so you can only see their eyes. And twenty years ago, I don't think you saw that very often. But it doesn't necessarily mean that it's a sign of extremism. There's a change in the culture, I agree. But to say that that's a sign of extremism, I'm not entirely sure. And I'm not the best person to say whether it's true or not. This is just to kind of summarize a little bit of the biases that we have in Indonesia growing up.

I also felt that racism, it happens most of the time to people who have less power or who are a minority. And, as I said, in *my* high school, I was always the majority. And, you know, high school kids are mean. It doesn't matter whether it's in the US or it's in Mozambique or in Indonesia, high school kids are mean. And we do have those examples where I'm one of probably the worst people to talk to because I keep telling people, you know, some of my friends they showed behavior of [being] gay and then we just called him "gay" all the time. And, oh, by the way, I went to an all-boys high school, so *there*, it's even harsher if you show a bit of gay behavior and everyone in the school calls you "gay". And that's for me... that's very serious bullying, I would say. Maybe not so much in terms of racism, from looking at color or religion, but I think for me, it still falls under racism because it's part of your identity.

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Felix shares one childhood memory he vividly remembers to this day.

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Some people will recall there was an Asian financial crisis back in 1998. And from the way I see it, and what I learned so far, it's that the Chinese-Indonesians were a scapegoat of that crisis. As a consequence of that, there were a lot of violent acts, including rapes towards Chinese-Indonesians. And at that time, I was five years old. So obviously, I don't remember. But one instance that I remember, there was basically a lot of demonstration and chaos. People were destroying stores. And of course, for us, we're also a bit afraid that we're going to be attacked at some point. And one instance that I remember, was that I picked up my sword, it was a Power Ranger Sword. I was five. And I thought, "I'm gonna go with my dad," because I saw my dad was holding a baseball bat or something.

And so the background story is that apparently in that compound, someone heard that there were a group of mass people trying to destroy houses and they were walking or moving towards our area. And so these people, including my dad, they wanted to protect the compound, right? And yeah, it's more like a blurry memory that I have. But I don't think I will forget that for the rest of my life. And it's kind of sad in a way but yeah, it's true. Luckily, nothing happened. So it was just a false alarm. But there was a lot of violent acts towards Chinese-Indonesians. And partly, also, it was driven by the fact [that] if you google "top 100 richest Indonesians", probably the majority of them are Chinese-Indonesian. So they are the easiest... well, I wouldn't say the easiest, but there are the clearest scapegoats, like, "Hey, these rich people are trying to maintain their power and they create a crisis for the rest of the country while the rich, they are unaffected. But the rest of the country, they are affected." And yeah, at least that's my experience, and that's what I know. I cannot say it's 100% the truth, but at least that's what I have been informed and what I have learned so far.

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Felix reflects on the experiences of being Chinese-Indonesian today against the background of Indonesia's history.

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In our generation, we don't see much of a different experience. We're Indonesians. Sure, we look a bit different, but we're Indonesians, and no one treats us differently. But looking back at the history, I think back in the 60s, our back-then President basically imposed a rule that no foreign names are allowed. So for instance, if you have a Chinese restaurant with a Chinese name, or an American restaurant that says, I don't know, "New Jersey something", these establishments were not allowed. So you had to change all the names to Indonesian [sounding names]. And, of course, these are the stories that my parents or my grandparents were telling me. They felt a bit offended because they cannot maintain their own culture in a way.

And I think, statistically, if I'm not – I might need to check the numbers again – but let's say, if we look at Indonesia, I think Chinese-Indonesians make up probably single digit percent. So not even 20 or 30%, right. But these populations... I have to say they are also quite concentrated in big cities. So if we look at the population of big cities, then it could be Jakarta, for instance – I grew up in Jakarta – I'm not surprised if the population of Chinese-Indonesians make up maybe 10%. And also, in Jakarta, there are certain areas where most of Chinese-Indonesians, if you go to those areas, you probably see 70, 80% Chinese-Indonesians. But I mean, it's also the same in the "Western" world, right. Even when I was living in the Netherlands, there are certain areas where Moroccans live, there are certain areas where the Turkish live, and there are certain areas where the Chinese live. So it's also the same, but I guess it's just a bigger scale because of the size of Jakarta itself.

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Felix didn't think much about racism until after high school, when he moved to the Netherlands to pursue his tertiary education. There, he would experience different things as a Chinese-Indonesian.

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In the Netherlands, that's the start when I started to see that, okay, racism exists. But I guess I'm a bit fortunate because in general, I think Dutch people have a positive view of Indonesians as, for instance, being nice, being kind... Maybe [we're] not always associated as people who have very high education or who can climb the ladder and be successful people, all these kinds of things. Maybe not necessarily that way. But you know how the, for instance, in general... I'm making generalization here, right, like, how the Americans see the Mexicans, that's very negative. And that's different between the Dutch and Indonesians. Yes, Indonesia was part of the colony back then. But I think we are not... we're now in the phase that, you know, the past is the past, and now let's continue forward.

Just to give a bit of context as well [here], there are a lot of Indonesians who moved to the Netherlands back in the 60s and the 90s. So 60s, because of that event that I mentioned earlier, where people really had to change their names. And I don't know how bad it was, but obviously, some people were not happy, and they decided to move. So a lot of people moved to the US, Australia and Netherlands, and maybe Canada as well. And 90s was the same, right: There was a crisis and some people had relatives in the Netherlands and they decided to move to the Netherlands. So there's quite some Indonesian community in the Netherlands. And even once I was in a train and then the train conductor [came to check my ticket] and he was like, "Oh, you're Indonesian." And then he started talking in Indonesian. And I was like, "Wow..." And this is like a Dutch Dutch, White Dutch. And I was very surprised that... It was probably in my first or second year. So I knew, yes, Indonesians are very much very welcomed, or at least we are accepted in the Netherlands. But I didn't know that there's a lot of interest in Indonesian culture. So yeah, that's I think the nice thing about being Indonesian in the Netherlands.

Being Chinese-Indonesian, probably not the best because, yeah, there are some kids every now and then who think I'm Chinese and would just call, "Nihao." But I think this is very common everywhere, right? I'm not necessarily triggered by this. I just let it go, or I make fun of it. And these are just educated

people who obviously try to ruin your day. But you know, if I give them attention, then yes, they're going to be successful. But if I just let it go, they're just wasting their energy. That's the way I see it. And the funny thing is, some of these kids, or most of these kids are also not Dutch Dutch. They're foreign-born Dutch. So it's funny to say that... yeah, it's just funny for me that both the immigrants are trying to mock each other. It's like, what's the point?

But also, I had one funny encounter. I was in a tram. And then there was this teenager sitting in front of me. And he said, "Nihao." And I said, "Look, I'm not Chinese." Normally, I would have ignored him, but because I had to sit in that tram for the next five minutes, I didn't want him to say, "Nihao" for five minutes, right? And I said, like, "Oh, yeah, I'm not Chinese." And he's like, "Oh, where are you from?" And I said, "Indonesia." And then he said, "Apa kabarmu." And "Apa kabarmu" means, "How are you" in Indonesian. So in a way... I don't know, it made me think. Is he trying to insult me or is he trying to be nice? And that made me think for a bit. And now, sometimes when I see people doing these things... It depends a bit on the context, right? If you're walking in the city center and then there's a group of kids 20, 30 meters away from you, and they're just shouting, "Nihao," sure, then they're trying to insult you. But in this instance, this guy is sitting right in front of me, and he's saying, "Nihao." And we ended up talking for like, I don't know, five minutes, maybe. So, you know, maybe when someone says this kind of slurs, take it with a grain of salt. Maybe they're trying to be nice. I think the majority [of people] still will try to insult you, but it's nice to get a bit of a different experience.

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Felix shares a story of how his friend responds in such situations.

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I have this nice story from a friend. So it's not me. She's also Asian. And we were just talking about instances where people call us in some language. And in this case, she was called I think, "Arigato," or something Japanese. And this person kept saying, "Arigato, arigato, arigato," like, twenty, I don't know, maybe, let's say ten times. And it was getting to the point that it's embarrassing and it's not pleasant. There are other people around as well, right. And she, you know, the first response to that was, "Are you Japanese?" And the guy was completely caught off guard. He didn't know what to say, and he just left. And I think for those Asians who have had this experience and want to make it a bit more fun, if you're called, "Nihao" or whatever, just tell them, "Are you Chinese?" And I think it's just a fun way to make out of it.

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After the Netherlands, Felix moved to a country in the Middle East for his work. There, he would see and experience something different.

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When I moved to this country from the Netherlands, I received a European salary because I worked in the Netherlands. But I also have Indonesian friends who moved to this country from Indonesia. And they get much less. Yes, of course, we're doing different jobs. But basically, they look at where you are from, especially their passport. I think I'm kind of like an exception, not many people have cases like me. But if you are, let's say French vs. Indonesian doing the same job, the French person would probably get maybe double in some cases, salary. So that for me, that's clear racism. I understand that they want to attract more Westerners, but I don't think that's the right way of doing it. So that's one serious topic.

Another serious topic is, I find they put people in boxes. For instance, the taxi drivers are 99% Pakistani and 1% Indian, probably something like that. And the salespeople in shopping malls, they are Filipinos, or in the fancy ones, they are probably Eastern Europeans. So if you go to the expensive shops, then, yeah, most of them are Eastern Europeans. And for me, this is creating racism, because people would

then think, "Okay, all taxi drivers are Pakistani." It doesn't matter if it's in that country. If you grew up in that country knowing that all the taxi drivers are Pakistani, and then you go to another country, you would naturally think that taxi drivers are Pakistani. But it's not true most of the time, right.

And one other serious experience that I had, and of course, the first two topics – the salary and putting people in boxes – I was not a victim, right, I was an observer. But the last one, I am a victim of that. It's about driving licenses. [It's a] very simple [topic], maybe it's annoying for some people, but for me, I don't think this is correct. For an Indonesian moving to this country wanting to change their driving license to the local driving license, first, they have an Indonesian passport and they have an Indonesian driving license, right? In this case, they have to start taking classes from zero. They have to take classes [and] they have to take tests to get their local driving license. On the opposite spectrum, if you are French and you have a French passport and a French driving license, you basically just need to pay a certain amount, I don't know, 50 bucks, 100 bucks, and then you get your local driving license in whatever, five minutes. And I fall somewhere in between. And I think this is also the topic of my life: I'm just like, somewhere in between, doesn't know where I belong. I have an Indonesian passport, but a Dutch driving license. And basically, they told me, "Yeah, you don't have to take the classes. It's fine. But you have to take the test."

So then, the first thing that came to my mind, I said, "So you're judging my driving skills based on my passport, not my driving license." And I was like, okay, hell no, I'm not playing your game, because this is not right. So in the end, I didn't convert my driving license. I just used taxis all the time and in that scenario, it worked out for me because I lived quite close to the office and taking taxis everyday was not a big deal. And it's not as expensive as in Europe, right? I think I remember one way would cost me maybe four or five euros. So it's not small, but compared to owning a car and paying the parking, the gas and the fines, financially, it also worked out for me. But maybe if I would replay the scenario, if I could just swap my driving license with my Dutch driving license, maybe I would have done it. But yeah, because of this instance, I was like, "No, I'm not playing your game." And to be honest, that's also why I think there are certain values in that region or in that area that doesn't really resonate with me, that made me uncomfortable also living in that place, and I decided to move back to Europe.

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Felix reflects upon when he started engaging with the subject of racism.

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I obviously saw them when I was in high school as I was one of the perpetrators. But I didn't see that as a problem yet. I think, funnily enough, I learned about racism mostly from living in the Netherlands, but also just looking or reading about what's happening in the US. And that's actually how... because what's happening in the US, for me, that's as worse as it can get. Well, probably worse in history than it could be... it's basically... yeah, Nazism and the Apartheid in South Africa, that's probably the worst that could get in history, right. But in *our* days, that's how bad it could get. And of course, there's the role of media that's exposing all these acts.

But then it started to get me thinking. And the more I learned about it, the more I find it in day-to-day life, and I started reflecting, okay, maybe what I did back in Indonesia was not right. And then... It's a long process, right. But if you would ask me when I started [thinking about racism], I think it was more when I moved to the Netherlands. Because in the Netherlands you have the Moroccans and the Turkish, which are kind of the Mexicans for Dutch people. And I also have friends that like... I used to have Moroccan and Turkish friends. And then getting exposed to the things that happened in the US through media, news, and stuff. And when I was living in Indonesia, I didn't get that kind of exposure. I was watching Indonesia news. But after I moved out, then I followed the English news, and most of them, they are from Europe or the U.S., and that's when it all started.

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Against the background of his experiences, Felix has the following to say on what he thinks it means to be antiracist.

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I think for me, it's just, you know, as I said, it's [racism] integrated in our society. And it's a long process. It's not like you just snap your fingers and then you become antiracist, right? It's a process. And you have to be disciplined. And for me, it's more just calling out myself when I do it [something racist]. And if I see other people doing that, it's hard to judge whether it's... whether I have to do something about it or not. Is it my responsibility? Is it my place to tell this person that it's not right? For me, that's still hard to navigate. If I can, normally I do that. But I think if I could share the best practice for me, it's, you know, if people want to hurt you, don't give them your energy. For me, it is as simple as that. Because it's basically satisfying their needs, right? That's what they want to achieve. And if you just make fun out of it, it's fine, and [then] let it go, just like my friend who's asking, "Are you Japanese?" For me, that's the ultimate answer. If I could do that all the time. I would do that all the time.

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You can find more information about the history of Chinese-Indonesians in Indonesia, as well as other articles, books and videos Felix recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our_racism.

This is Fumi and #OUR_racism. See you next month, on June 7th!

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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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A big thank you to Felix for his time and energy in sharing with us his stories and insightful reflections on this issue.