

# Rumah Abu Han, a historic ancestral house in Surabaya

More than a decade after the fall of Soeharto in 1998, with the waning of political discriminatory policy and cultural bias against Chinese Indonesians, a number of films dealing with the issue of Chinese Indonesian culture and experience have been publicly released.

Kathleen Azali

Reviewed film: *Rumah Abu Han Documentary*, Directed and produced by Kevin Reinaldo Arffandy, 2011. A documentary film about an ancestral house of the Han family in Surabaya, Indonesia. Downloadable for free from: <http://vimeo.com/24602582> More information at <http://www.facebook.com/rumahabuhandocumentaryfilm>

TO NAME A FEW, we have *Ca Bau Kan* (Nia Dinata, 2002), *Babi Buta yang Ingin Terbang* (Blind Pig Who Wants to Fly, Edwin, 2008), *The Anniversaries* (Ariani Darmawan, 2006), *Anak Naga Beranak Naga* (Dragons Begets Dragons, Ariani Darmawan, 2006), *A Trip to the Wound* (Edwin, 2007), *Sugiharti Halim* (Ariani Darmawan, 2008), and *Cin(T)ja* (Sammaria Simanjutak, 2009). These films tell the continuous (re)negotiation of "Chineseness", the dynamics of Chinese discrimination and assimilation, usually through the narrations of their ideas, experiences, emotions, and ambiguities of being Chinese in Indonesia. Due to the difficulties in screening them through mainstream cinema, most of them are screened in festivals and local communities.

*Rumah Abu Han* (The Han's Ancestral House) documentary, then, is noteworthy for (re)telling the stories of Chinese assimilation and integration within its surrounding environment and communities by focusing on a physical, tangible heritage, and for its method of distribution through the social video-sharing website, Vimeo. This short, 22-minute documentary was released in 2011, directed by Kevin Reinaldo Arffandy, a recent graduate from Petra Christian University, Surabaya, for his final year assignment, and produced under his independent production house, Ranting Pohon production.

In Surabaya, Indonesia, there are three well-known Chinese ancestral houses, owned by the clans of Han, The and Tjoa (Onghokham, 2005). The Han's ancestral house is perhaps the best known since it is the biggest, the oldest, still well-maintained and is relatively accessible to the public. The documentary attempts to show the integration of Chinese, Dutch and Javanese cultures by tracing the architecture and the interior elements through narrated descriptions and interviews with the owner (Robert Rosihan), the caretaker (Karno), local heritage community (Freddy Istanto) and a lecturer from Petra Christian University specialising in Chinese heritage (Hanny Kwartanti).

The film opens with a general overview of Surabaya as a bustling, modernising city with common urban problems, and here the filmmaker laments how the rapid urban growth has led to the indifference and disregard for their own cultural heritage and history. Through an interview with Freddy Istanto, a well-known media campaigner from the Surabaya Heritage Society, the film attempts to promote the importance of preserving cultural heritage in establishing the city's sense of place and identity – the 'spirit' of the city.

Before focusing on the ancestral house, the film briefly explains how the old town area of Surabaya near the Kalimas river and Jembatan Merah bridge was divided by the Dutch colonial government into three areas based on ethnicity – the *Maleische Camp* for the Malays, the *Chineez Camp* for the Chinese, and *Arab Camp* for the Arabs. This division has contributed in shaping the routines of everyday life, the patterns of settlement, and the physical environment.

The film then turns to the house, highlighting the interior elements and the history of the Han's family through interviews with the owner, Robert Rosihan. Located on Jalan Karet, the Han's ancestral house was the first ancestral house in Surabaya, built circa 18th century by Han Bwee Koo,

the 6th generation of the Han family first arriving in the coastal city Lasem in 1673. Although *rumah abu* literally means a house of ashes, it is not a mausoleum (even though, confusingly, that is the term used in Surabaya for a mausoleum). The family's preservation of its 'authentic' use and elements, despite the lack of governmental and other external support, is highly commended.

The main feature of the house highlighted in this film is its iconic blend of Chinese, Dutch colonial and Javanese architectural and interior elements, reflecting the history, the socio-cultural values, and the tropical location. It is a well-championed – if perhaps slightly romanticised – interpretation of the Han's ancestral house, also proposed by Hedy C. Indrani and Maria Ernawati Prasodjo (2005) in *Tipologi, Organisasi Ruang, dan Elemen Interior Rumah Abu Han di Surabaya*, an article Arffandy most likely called on, when making this documentary.

There are two main areas in the house: the prayer area and the living area. The prayer area is divided into the terrace, the guest hall, the family hall, and the prayer hall, while the living area contains bedrooms, bathrooms and the kitchen. To describe this interior of the house, the film uses 3D floor plan renderings and lingering shots of the interior elements like wooden carvings, floor tiles and window patterns. Hanny Kwartanti is interviewed to elaborate on symbolic interpretations of the Chinese interior elements. The film then scans and briefly describes the rooms, the origins of some architectural elements (pillars imported from Glasgow, decorative carvings from China), the furniture (Dutch-style chairs, Chinese marble tables), as well as the Han's family portraits and their genealogy chart.

A particular attention is given to the prayer hall, which is indeed originally designed as the most important area of the house. This is where the ancestral tablets (*sinci*) are stored, and where the family burns incense at the altar and prays to their ancestors.

The film then describes the current use of the house through interviews with the owner and the one of the caretakers, Karno. The owner elaborates that the house has been opened for public on numerous occasions for educational purposes, including research, school trips, book discussions, and batik *encim* exhibitions. What is sadly missing in this film, however, is the description of the surrounding environment, which has made, thus far, regular public functions and opening hours, impossible.

Fortunately, we had the privilege of organizing a public screening and lecture at C20 Library, supported by a Surabaya historic community called *Surabaya Tempo Dulu*, and the Centre for Chinese Indonesian Studies from Petra Christian University. The panellists were Arffandy himself, Robert Rosihan, and Lukito Kartono, a lecturer specialising in Chinese and Indonesian architecture. This public event prompted questions, dialogues and ideas. Compared to other ancestral houses in Surabaya, the Han's as a privately-owned heritage building is the most publicly accessible and relatively well-maintained, but it is still admittedly in dismal condition on the brink of disuse. The standard idea to turn it into a museum, a café, or other public space is inapplicable due to the surrounding heavy loading and unloading zone, and the questionable security of the area. The owner has also revealed that the ill-defined category of 'heritage building' in Surabaya has, contradictorily, made the maintenance problematic, particularly with its heavy land taxes and complicated renovation procedures. Kartono also supplemented the information from the film with a complex historical and architectural analysis.

With his focus on the interior elements, Arffandy only gives us a relatively superficial overview of the Han's ancestral house. Graduated with a degree in Visual Communication and Design, Arffandy has directed and produced a visually appealing documentary with a particular focus on visual elements and forms of the house, but fails to put it within historical and cultural contexts. The emphasis is placed on obvious symbols such as dragons, lions, ancestral tablets, and the readings of visual elements from the interviews are rather restricted to Chinese symbols, with little effort to link them to various influences. Granted, this lack of exhaustive information perhaps can also be attributed to the paucity of accessible and credible historical information about Surabaya. Indeed, aside from the films by Ariani Darmawan, most films dealing with the issue of 'Chineseness' mentioned above usually remain within ambiguous questions of identities, ideas and experiences. This is where a venue for public screening and forum is necessary for the filmmakers to garner feedback for their works.

Overall, *Rumah Abu Han Documentary* with its attractive visuals and photography serves as an appealing audio-visual introduction, much-needed to promote a relatively obscure heritage building of Surabaya. Even in Surabaya, not too many people know of its existence; a fate that has befallen numerous other old buildings of this city. Hopefully, the creation of this documentary by a young Indonesian filmmaker, with its utilisation of a global, far-reaching video-sharing website, will prompt greater interests in the ancestral house, and other oft-neglected heritage of Surabaya.

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## References

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Right (from top to bottom): The Family Hall; The Han's Ancestral House, located on Jalan Karet, Surabaya; 3D architectural renderings of the house; Han Bwee Koo, who founded the Han's ancestral house; Ancestral tablets.

