

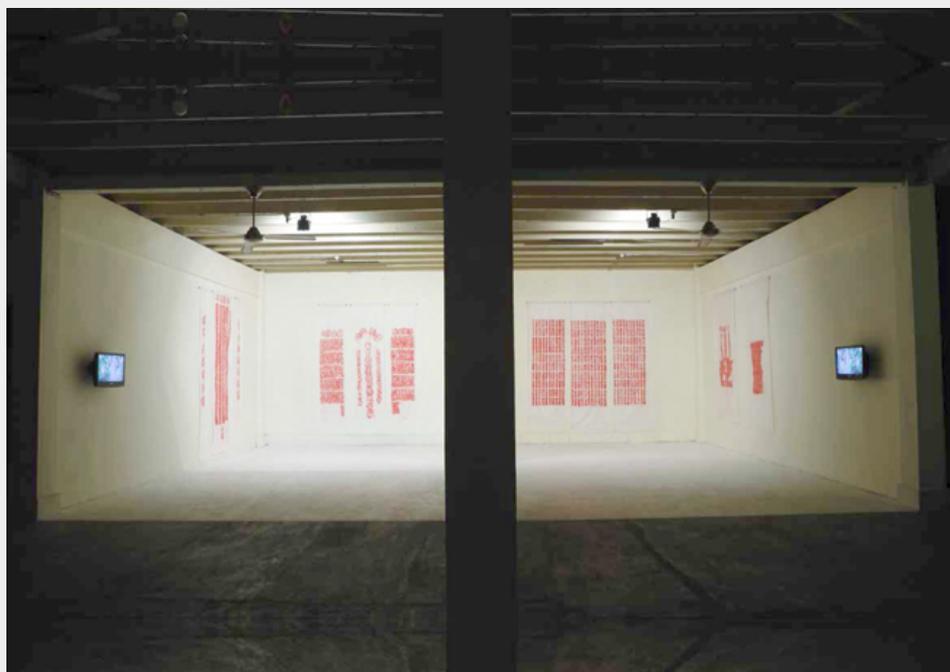


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Bringing to Life a Forgotten Massacre in Words and Pictures

By Gita Hastarika on 2:20 pm February 1, 2014.
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Artist F.X. Harsono's 'Rewriting on the Tomb.' (Photo courtesy of F.X. Harsono)

For Indonesian visual artist F.X. Harsono, researching the truth behind several cases of massacres against the Chinese community in Indonesia has become a lifelong obsession, his biggest arts project and one he will likely never stop pursuing.

It all started in 2008 when he discovered a collection of black-and-white photographs taken by his late father, Oh Hok Tjoe, in their hometown of Blitar, East Java, between 1949 and 1951.

Oh, who worked as a professional photographer in the small town, was documenting the discovery of mass graves of ethnic Chinese who had fallen victim to one of the lesser-known massacres against Chinese-Indonesians around the time the Dutch tried to regain control of Indonesia after World War II, known to Indonesians as "The Second Clash."

The massacres occurred across Java between 1947 and 1948, shortly after Indonesia gained independence, out of claims that the Chinese were aiding the Dutch in their attempt to regain control of



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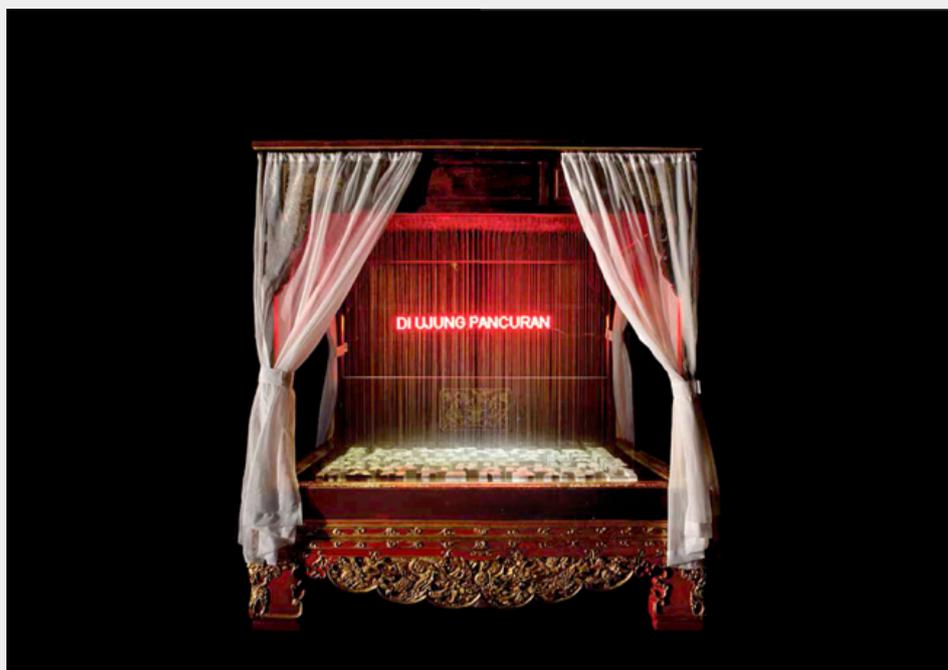
Indonesia. “It was political in the beginning, but the massacre was driven by greed,” Harsono says.

In every photo taken by his father, there is a caption stating the time and location of the unearthing of these mass graves, and sometimes the names of the victims.

These photos inspired Harsono to learn more, although he understood it meant digging up the truth behind a dark period of history kept deeply buried.

“Chinese people believe their lives will never be peaceful if they don’t know what happened to their ancestors. This is why finding the bodies and re-burying them in a proper place is important,” Harsono says.

He also began consulting books on the subject, such as “Tionghoa dalam Pusaran Politik Indonesia” (“Chinese in Indonesian Political Turmoil”) by Chinese-Indonesian historian Benny G. Setiono, and “Dalam Api dan Bara” (“In Flames and Ashes”) by Tjambuk Berdoeri, the pen name of one of the first Chinese-Indonesian journalists, Kwee Thiam Tjing.



Harsono's 'The Raining Bed.' (Photo courtesy of F.X. Harsono)

From these references, Harsono returned to his hometown, Blitar, and interviewed old people there. “The gateway is always old people,” he says.

In Blitar, Harsono met his first massacre survivor, Sungki, who lives in Karangbendo village.

In a documentary video, “Ndudah,” which means “Digging” in Javanese, directed by Harsono, Sungki said he and his parents were taken from Blitar to Karangbendo by the soldiers. But unlike his father, Gisang, who was killed, he was released. “He was considered a Javanese kid. His father was Chinese, but his mother was Javanese,” Harsono says.

In the video, Sungki points to where the murder took place, in the back yard of a Javanese family’s home. One of the daughters of that family, Kasminah, was also interviewed in the documentary.

“After the soldiers went away, my father buried the dead bodies, including Sungki’s father,” Kasminah says in the video. She also recognizes her father, Doelah, in one of Oh Hok Tjoe’s photographs.

Harsono says he was horrified when he learned that ethnic Chinese were not only shot during the massacre, but also locked inside homes or public buildings that were then set ablaze.

He was also mortified that these killings were clearly recorded by the local administration.

“I was shocked by how detailed the descriptions are,” he says.

In Blitar, massacres happened in several villages, including Ngrotorejo, Karangbendo, Glodok, Jajar and Sanankulon. One mass grave was found to contain 191 corpses, and the name of every person is inscribed on a monument that now marks the site.

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From Blitar, Harsono moved to other small towns like Nganjuk, Tulungagung, Kediri, Magelang, Yogyakarta and Cirebon. Then the research turned from photos to numbers: 191 dead in Blitar, 87 in Tulungagung, 13 in Kediri, and in Nganjuk, at least 800.

Harsono found a mass grave in Nganjuk and met Tio Teng Liep, or Slamet, the grave keeper who also happened to witness the atrocity. Almost every five to 10 meters, they found one grave during the digging process. "If we find 20 corpses in one hole, then all those bodies were in one coffin," Slamet says to Harsono in the documentary.

There are other towns believed to have Chinese mass graves, like Jatitujuh, Slawi and Wonosobo, which Harsono has not yet had the chance to visit. And in other towns mentioned in Setiono's book, including Malang and Magelang, mass graves have already been cleared out.

But Harsono is also intrigued about towns that have no recorded massacres, like Parakan, where the local Chinese community is well-respected, and Cirebon, where the Chinese have shaped much of the town's history.

Harsono turned his research into works of art in a bid to create more awareness about the atrocities. At every mass grave he encountered, he traced the epitaphs using red ink onto a piece of white cloth, leaving traces of Chinese characters bearing the names of the dead, and he compiled interview footage that he made during his research into a 13-minute documentary.

One piece of work, called "The Inner Side of Life," features cotton shirts on which he has written by hand the eyewitness testimonies of the massacres in the old spelling style in use at the time.

He also uses an LED box to display running texts about the history of the Chinese community in Indonesia in a work titled "Course of Time."

There are a total of seven works using various mediums in Harsono's solo exhibition, titled "What We Have Here Perceived as Truth We Shall Some Day Encounter as Beauty," touching on the delicate subject. The exhibition was held at the National Gallery in Jakarta in 2009 and last July at the Yogyakarta National Museum.

At both exhibitions, people asked "Why?" "What do you want to prove?" and accused him of "opening old wounds."

Harsono says that although the Chinese community has finally gained its long overdue recognition as part of the country in 1999, under former president Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid, the dark past must never be forgotten.

"[People] are trying to make peace with their history. But what is peace if we refuse to look at and admit the bad?"

History is prone to repeat itself if a nation refuses to acknowledge its own past. The ethnic Chinese in Batavia (now Jakarta) were massacred by the Dutch in 1740, and later by fellow Indonesians during the Second Clash, and again in 1998, targeted in riots sweeping Jakarta.

Harsono says he admires the courage of those willing to speak up about the Second Clash massacres and sympathizes with those who don't. He also admires works like the Oscar-nominated documentary "The Act of Killing," about the 1965-1966 anti-communist purge that largely targeted ethnic Chinese.

"In the beginning it was all about finding my identity and the history of my family. But eventually it grew bigger than that," Harsono says. For him, there is no way we can move forward without understanding where we belong. That is why there is no "the wrong time" for speaking up about a lost history.

When asked what he feels about his identity after this pursuit of the history of his own people, he answers: "I am an Indonesian."

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