

The dark side of freedom

An interview with Indonesian filmmaker Garin Nugroho

Yenni Kwok in Jakarta



Most Indonesian children grow up listening to stories about Kancil, a clever, mischievous mouse-deer who typically finds himself relying on his wits in order to save his life. His adventures often offer moral lessons for the young.

But filmmaker Garin Nugroho's documentary, *Dongeng Kancil Tentang Kemerdekaan* (*Kancil's Tale of Freedom*) is no children's fable. Instead, it is a real-life story about children, focusing on four young boys who will do anything they can just to survive in Jogjakarta, in central Java.

The Jakarta Post calls the film "a less than comfortable and reassuring viewing experience." And, for many Indonesians who have prospered along with the country's economic boom, indeed, it is.

Having left their families behind, Kancil, Sugeng, Topo and Atta, ages nine to 13, sleep and live on the streets of Jogjakarta. They scavenge for leftover food on the trains and steal clean clothes off laundry lines. Their favorite pastimes are sniffing glue, drinking the narcotic jimson juice and experimenting with sex. To earn money, the boys polish shoes and sing on buses.

The documentary was shot in 1995, around the time Indonesia was celebrating the 50th anniversary of its independence from foreign rule. Thus, there is no little irony made of the fact that despite their hard life, the boys take pride in the personal freedom they have. But are these dirt-stained urchins really part of the dream nation Indonesia's founding fathers hoped to build?

Nugroho, Indonesia's leading young film director, made the 55-minute documentary for NHK, a Japanese television station – an arrangement which itself has stirred much controversy. Says Sella Pasaribu, a college student who attended a screening of the film: "We should not have shown this overseas, especially not to the Japanese. They once ruled us. There should be limits to what can be shown outside the country."

Throughout his career, Nugroho, 35, has pushed the limits of convention. He gave up a law career in the hope of pursuing justice in a different way. His work, comprised of feature films and documentaries, covers a range of topics, including the environment and the country's rural population. Nugroho spoke about his latest work and the debate it has sparked. Excerpts:

You tied your documentary to the 50th anniversary of Indonesia's independence. What message did you want to deliver about the country today?

As a filmmaker, I could have chosen to celebrate our independence by focusing on the country's booming economy. Instead, I chose to explore aspects of life that have been ignored -- such as the plight of street children. Our country now has many problems that we need to address. If we ignore them, how can our society progress?

Do you see yourself as a defender of street children?

No. A filmmaker's duty is to present his vision. Solving these children's problems is the task of Non-Governmental Organizations or child-care specialists. I am not an expert on what children need. So, while the message of my documentary may offer street children some defense, I did not make the film with this in mind.

What reactions have you gotten from audiences in Japan and Indonesia?

NHK broadcast it in Japan last year – but I never heard about reactions there. In Indonesia, I held screenings for some Muslim organizations, children's educators and public officials. Most people were very surprised and asked: "Could this really be happening?" Others were very critical, calling the film an exaggeration. Another said: "You may have thought you were making this film in the name of humanity, but ultimately, you made it for your own good." Still others felt it attracted some much-needed attention to problems that our country is not open about.

Many of the recent riots have been started by lower-class teenagers. What do you see in this?

We've lost our vision. We no longer know how to live together as a nation. Nepotism runs rampant in Indonesia. For example, there really is no guarantee that smart, hard-working individuals will get decent jobs. Even small children have said to me: "If I don't have connections, how can I succeed?" People who have no hope become anxious. Then, they become violent. They don't know what else to do.

Do you get harassed by the state authorities for your work?

I am used to getting complaints about my films from the authorities. They'll keep doing their job. I'll keep doing mine.

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