

# The house of Kwee Sik Poo

## An Indonesian-Chinese merchant from Pasuruan

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### ABSTRACT

The Kwee family is an old Indonesian-Chinese family from Pasuruan, in East Java, and one of a few merchant families of either Chinese or Arab ethnic origin which led successful lives in this small town in the nineteenth century. From their Chinese ancestral village, Liu Chuan in Fujian province, China, a Kwee ancestor travelled to Southeast Asia and settled in Pasuruan, probably in the eighteenth century. As with many families who held important positions in the ethnic Chinese community, it also owned large homes, mostly in a mixed architectural style, called “eclecticism” and later in what was known as “the Indies-empire style”. The early family history is still clouded in mystery, as not much concrete information has survived. Its descendants worked hard and prospered and dealt among economic undertakings such as sugar production, opium sales, buying and selling of property and land as well as running pawnshops.

### KEYWORDS

Pasuruan; Indies-empire style; architecture; ethnic Chinese; sugar.

### INTRODUCTION

Under early Dutch rule, especially after the insurrection of the ethnic Chinese against the Dutch in 1740, many ethnic groups in Netherlands-Indies, chiefly among them Malay, Arabs, and Chinese, were forcibly separated by allotting them different quarters of cities, a system known as the *wijkenstelsel* (quarter system). People wanting to leave or enter the area had to carry and show a pass, *passenstelsel* (pass system) in order to be let into or out (Phoa Liong Gie 1992). The ethnic Chinese were segregated from the Dutch in their own ethnic Chinese quarter, the “Petjinan”, and within these they developed their own societal system, using the ethnic Chinese clan system or general associations to

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organize all matters pertaining to their community, including the setting up of businesses, and to lend assistance to those who needed help. This *wijkenstelsel* was slowly terminated in the early twentieth century.

In the colonial period, the Dutch appointed prominent people with whom they were on good terms, they were made heads of these communities and they became part of the *officierenstelsel*, a hierarchical system used until the 1930s. These officers also functioned as a kind of “buffer” between the Dutch and the ethnic Chinese and Indonesians. If problems arose, they were the go-between and they were also often in charge of collecting certain taxes on behalf of the Dutch, relieving the latter of having to deal with the locals directly. This delegation of duty fuelled animosity against the ethnic Chinese among the locals, although the Javanese elite also collected certain taxes.

The river which ran from north to south in Pasuruan was a large natural advantage and played an important part in the development of this area. The natural waterway was used for trade as well as for the transportation of agricultural goods to harbours to be sent to other areas in the Archipelago. Another big trade incentive was the Great Post Road, *Grote Postweg*, built by the Dutch, which linked Pasuruan to other places on the northern coast of the island of Java. These felicitous economic conditions led to an influx of traders from a variety of ethnic groups, especially Arabs and Chinese but also Madurese, the majority of whom were involved in the trade in agricultural products like rice, tobacco, and sugarcane, as well as in the production of sugar (Handinoto 2008). From before the early 1400s up to 1830, most of small-scale sugar-mills throughout the Netherlands Indies were owned by ethnic Chinese, who produced lower quantities of sugar as they relied on simple technology like heavy mill-stones. Up to the end of the rule of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie/VOC) monopoly on the sugar trade in 1798, the ethnic Chinese were obliged to deliver their produce to the VOC and were paid fixed prices (Ruskanda, Ridwan, and Keiji 1995). However, the sugarcane cultivation around Pasuruan was relatively recent and the first known sugar-mill in Pasuruan was owned by the Kapitein der Chinezen in 1799 (De Vries 1931). In 1887, the Dutch set up a sugarcane research centre in Pasuruan, to improve production and yield. This proved so successful Pasuruan became the second largest sugar-producing area in the world, second only to Cuba (Kano 2008).

The introduction of the Cultivation System (*Cultuurstelsel*) in 1830, a form of forced cultivation, stipulated that twenty percent of the land had to be used for trade crops and sold at (low) fixed prices to the Dutch for export, thereby swelling the coffers of the Netherlands East Indies government. In the long run this proved to be devastating to the agricultural production and led to poverty among the farmers, chiefly because fewer food crops were cultivated. This system was subsequently abolished for sugar at least in 1870 (Knight 2007). In this same period, sugar-mills in Indonesia saw the introduction of the use of modern machinery from France and England which increased the sugar production tremendously. About eleven percent of modern sugar-mills

was then owned by ethnic Chinese, but most were smaller mills compared to those owned by the Dutch (Hudig Zn 1886).

#### CHINESE MERCHANT HOUSE IN PASURUAN IN JALAN SOEKARNO-HATTA

Sometime in the eighteenth century an ethnic Chinese family with the surname Kwee settled in Pasuruan, it is unknown where and when this family had come from precisely before it settled here. Their ancestral village in China is Liu Chuan, now an hour's drive north-west of Xiamen, in Fujian province. One interesting point is that this Kwee family in the past were Muslims in China as they were of the Hui people, who descended from Persian and Central Asian traders intermarried with Han Chinese, and therefore did not consume pork in the past, but now many have converted to other religions.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. A family portrait from approximately 1905 of Kwee Sik Poo and his second wife The Tien Nio, and their family, comprising of four sons and two daughters. Kwee Khoen Ling, his second son who would succeed him as “Kapitein der Chineezen” stands right behind him. This image was at their home Jalan Raya 9 (now Jalan Soekarno-Hatta), Pasuruan, the current house of Muhammad bin Thalib family. Photograph scanned from original from the family Kwee, 2009.

One member of this family was Kwee Sik Poo (Figure 1), born in 1847, one of two sons of a sugar-mill owner, Kwee Ting Swan, who inherited the Kawis Redjo sugar-mill in 1847 with his brother Kwee Sik Khie (*De Oostpost* 10 September 1855). Apart from producing sugar, the family was involved in several other businesses like the sale of rice and opium on an annual lease

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication, Kwee family temple in Liu Chuan, Fujian province, China, October 2015.

from the government; the practice was legal at the time, and very profitable, even though it had a disastrous effect on its users. Large profits from these businesses made it possible to build large houses, although not as grand as those their descendants were to build. Later they were also active in buying and selling of land and renting houses (Oral family history). Generally, the rich ethnic Chinese people in Pasuruan at that time followed a mixture of Chinese, western and Javanese lifestyles, and this could be clearly seen in their houses, as some also kept Javanese gamelans and krisses inherited from their own *priyayi* ancestors, and they observed the requisite rituals attached to these as well. Most spoke Dutch and Javanese at home (Handinoto 2008; Oral family history).



Figure 2. Official picture of the transfer of the position of Kapitein der Chineezen of Pasuruan from Kwee Sik Poo to his second son Kwee Khoen Ling, 1926, Pasuruan. Photograph from the album of Kwee Tik Hwie, 2014.

In Pasuruan, Kwee Sik Poo was appointed Kapitein of the Chinese of Pasuruan in 1886 to replace Han Hoo Tjoan (*Bataviaasch Handelsblad* 5-3-1886). He held many meetings in his house throughout his tenure as an officer of the ethnic Chinese in Pasuruan (Figure 2). In recognition of his contributions to the Pasuruan ethnic Chinese community as a whole, and giving assistance to people in need, he was made a knight, “Ridder in de orde van Oranje Nassau”, in 1911. His second eldest son, Kwee Khoen Ling, followed in his footsteps and became the Kapitein of Pasuruan from 1926 to 1933 (*De Indische Courant* 13-8-1926, 7-8-1933).

These businesses produced the wealth which the family could use not only to build large and beautiful houses, but also to re-invest in their businesses or



to purchase more houses and land. One of the houses the family Kwee built was a house in Jalan Soekarno-Hatta (formerly Jalan Raya, Hoofdweg). So far it has not been possible to determine who designed the house or when exactly it was built, however I estimate this must have happened between 1770-1830. The house has the typical Fujian Chinese “swallowtail”-shaped roofs (Figure 3), but below the roof, the house was constructed in a classical European style with some Chinese interior features. The spacious front porch has typically classical columns (Figure 4), as has the spacious rear of the house (Figure 5).



Figure 3. The house with the typical Fujianese “swallowtail” shaped roofs formerly of Kwee Sik Poo at Jalan Soekarno Hatta (formerly Jalan Raya), with the inscription “Daroessalam” placed by Muhammad bin Thalib after he bought the house in 1937 from Kwee Khoen Ling. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.



Figure 4. Front image of the Kwee house with the classical styled columns visible behind the foliage. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.



Figure 5. The spacious rear of the house has thick classical styled columns. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.

Upon entering the house through one of the three tall doors, also typical of Indies-empire style, the visitor comes into the front room, with small alcoves on either side. Then follows a hallway, with two bedrooms on either side, one of which is the master-bedroom. Behind this is the main hall with four Venetian cast-iron supporting columns (Figure 6). This central hall is flanked by two large open areas with French doors opening outwards. A large wooden table also stands here, in front of a wooden doorway ornamented with stained glass inserts (Figure 7). Deeper into the interior is the prayer room, which contains the family altar table holding the wooden family ancestral tablets at the end of the room. In this instance it is a unique, white-painted masonry structure (Figure 8). Most ethnic Chinese houses have wooden altars. The current owners, descendants of a prominent Pasuruan ethnic Arab-Yemeni family from Kalimantan, whose first member settling in Pasuruan was Muhammad bin Thalib (Figure 9), initially did not know the function of the stone structure, which was later explained to them. Muhammad bin Thalib, who bought this house in 1937, named the house "Daroessalam" (see Figure 3), meaning Abode of Peace, because it was a convivial tradition of the Kwee family to lodge guests in the rooms facing the front yard, as well as keeping open house for visitors. When he purchased the house, Muhammad bin Thalib wanted to retain this tradition. The house is soon to be turned into a hotel and hopefully will be ready in 2017, one of the grandsons has said.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Adib bin Thalib, Pasuruan, 2015.





Figure 6. The central hall of the house with two of four cast iron columns imported from Venice. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.



Figure 7. The central hall with one of two large dining tables, visible too is the beautifully glass in lead decorated entrance to the prayer hall. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.



Figure 8. The prayer hall with a unique masonry altar, where the Kwee family placed their wooden tablets, called "Sin Tji" with the birth and death data inscribed, which they pay respect to, specially on special occasions. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.



Figure 9. Portrait of Muhammad bin Thalib, the successful Arab-Yemeni merchant from Kalimantan, who in 1937 bought this house from Kwee Khoen Ling. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.



Most of the interior furnishing, like the four cast-iron columns in the central hall (Figure 6), were imported from Europe. The master-bedroom has a wooden ceiling covered with a large western-style painting (Figure 10). Inside the house there are also some Chinese wooden decorations (Figure 11). This makes the house a prime example of a mixture of Chinese and Western interior. Cross ventilation is achieved by small openings in the walls, which are also very thick, about four bricks in depth. This is good insulation which, in combination with the high ceilings, helps to keep the heat out. On both sides the front yard of this house is flanked by two-storey annexes which also contained guestrooms. These have fine wooden balconies which are relatively well preserved (Figure 12). At the rear of the house were the servants' quarters, but these have now disappeared as the back garden has been rented out and houses have been built on that piece of land. The sides of the main house have large covered walkways with a semi-closed balustrade to protect them from the rain (Figure 13). The rear of the house also has a second storey, currently being used to house swallow's nests. What it was used for in the past is not known, but it was probably a storage place (Figure 14).

Kwee Sik Poo died in 1930 and his second son, Kwee Khoen Ling, continued to live in this house until he ran into financial difficulties because of the fall in the prices of commodities like sugar, and was forced to sell the house and land in 1937 (*De Indische Courant* 7-8-1937). The family moved to a large house in what is now Jalan Hasanudin (formerly Jalan Sangar), which his wife inherited from her father.



Figure 10. The main bedroom of the house has a western painting on the ceiling, maker is unknown. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.



Figure 11. Wooden Chinese decoration on the entrance to the prayer hall, depicting a dragon. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.



Figure 12. At the sides of the front yard stands two buildings that houses rooms for visitors, and they have beautifully crafted wooden balconies. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.





Figure 13. The sides of the house has wide sidewalks covered by thick covered balustrades to protect from the heat of the sun and rain. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.



Figure 14. The roof of the rear part of the house covers a second storey that is currently being used to house swallow nests, but was a storage place in the past. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2015.

## INDIES-EMPIRE HOUSE IN JALAN HASANUDIN

A more strictly Indies-empire style house in Jalan Hasanudin (formerly Jalan Sangar) was constructed in an area outside the boundaries of the traditional Chinatown as its original owner was a Dutchman. It was built around 1800 and was bought from its Dutch owner by Tan King Soen around 1840. His son, Tan Kong Sing, subsequently inherited it. His eldest daughter, Tan Hing Nio, married Kwee Khoen Ling, and this couple moved into this house with their family in 1937 after selling their own house in Jalan Soekarno-Hatta to Muhammad bin Thalib (Figure 15).



Figure 15. The Kwee Khoen Ling family moved to this house in 1937, now known as the “rumah singa”, because of the two lions standing prominently at the front yard of this house formerly from Tan Kong Sing. Photograph by Kwee Tat Hwie, 1990.

This house is larger than their former dwelling in Jalan Soekarno-Hatta, and has large separate pavilions on either side of the main house. The central main house has a feature typical of Indies-empire style houses, three doors, similar to those in the older houses in Chinatown above (Figure 16). The interior layout is not dissimilar to the older Kwee house although this house was built by a Dutchman and is of more recent date as it was built around 1800. The interior is more elaborate and the roof is in a more classic Roman style. The interior décor is “Art Nouveau” (Figure 17), and beautiful blue Venetian glass was used in the panels in the side doors (Figure 18). Since Art Nouveau only came into fashion in around 1890, some of these interior decorations were obviously added to the house at a later date. All four walls of the main bedroom have been tiled (Figure 19), quite a common feature in those days (Handinoto 2008).





Figure 16. The main central part of this house with three entrance doors and classic roof facade, typical of the Indies-empire architectural style. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.



Figure 17. An example of a Jugendstil style glass in lead decoration. Photograph by Go Tiong Han, 2013.



Figure 18. Beautiful Venetian blue coloured glass panel of the house side doors, with figures etched on it. Photograph by Go Tiong Han, 2013.



Figure 19. The main bedroom of the house with porcelain tiles from top to bottom. Photograph by Kwee Tat Hwie, 1990.



Upon entering one of the three main doors, two small open halls stand on either side (Figure 20) and there is a central hallway flanked by four large rooms. At the end of this hallway stands the large wooden family Tan altar (Figure 21). The wooden tablets on this altar are inscribed with the names of the Tan family members who have passed away, giving their birth and death data (Figure 22). This is an inalienable part of Confucian culture, respecting the ancestors by remembering them on certain occasions, and it is strictly speaking non-religious.



Figure 20. The side room near the entrance, with a collection of krisses, likely inherited from the Tjoa family. Photograph by Go Tiong Han, 2013.



Figure 21. The central hallway with mainly Chinese Ching dynasty antiques, and the family Tan altar at the end. Photograph by Kwee Hong Sien, 2014.



Figure 22. The family Tan altar with the wooden “Sin Tji’s” and pictures from more recent descendants. Photograph by Go Tiong Han, 2013.



Figure 23. The eldest known ancestors of this particular Kwee family, left is the first wife and right is Kwee Tjong Hock, 1754-1842. This painting hangs next to the family Tan altar, and stood previously at the Kwee house at Jalan Soekarno-Hatta (formerly Jalan Raya). Photograph by Kwee Tat Hwie, 1990.



At the moment the house currently still contains many Chinese antique pieces dating from the Ching dynasty, including Chinese porcelain vases, chairs, and tables (Figure 21). A large painting depicts the oldest Kwee ancestor of whom we know in Chinese Imperial official dress, Kwee Tjong Hock, and his first wife whose name has been lost (Figure 23); we only know the name of his second wife, Oei Tjwan Nio.

In the large front yard of the house stand two large lions prominently positioned on either side, which give this house its nickname “rumah singa” or lions’ house (Figure 24). These two statues are said to have come originally from the Kwee family’s first house in Jalan Soekarno-Hatta (formerly Jalan Raya) (Oral family history).



Figure 24. One of two lions made of cast iron, according to some within the family Kwee, they were originally at the Kwee house at Jalan Soekarno-Hatta (formerly Jalan Raya). Photograph by Go Tiong Han, 2013.

This family also owns a large antique gamelan set, part of a group of three gamelan sets and it is said to be the only one left (Oral family history), a fact which cannot be ascertained though, and it is still prayed for every morning in accordance with Javanese tradition (Figure 25). The family also possesses a large collection of old krisses, and some of them are stored in a wooden cabinet on the right-hand side of the hall at the main entrance to the central house (see Figure 19). These Javanese cultural items were probably inherited by the Tan family through Tan Kong Sing’s wife, Tjoa Tjhiep Nio, whose ancestor was Nyai Roro Kinjeng, a member of a local Javanese elite family and is now buried at the Sunan Ampel Cemetery behind the Sunan Ampel Mosque.



Figure 25. The old gamelan set that the family still protects and prays for, likely inherited from the Tjoa family, through the wife of Tan Kong Sing, Tjoa Tjhiap Nio. Photograph by Go Tiong Han, 2013.

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