

The Chinese from Indonesia

The Chinese from Indonesia

The History of a Minority

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Table of Contents

Introduction	9
Terminology and Spelling	11
The Chinese: A Heterogeneous Group	12
I From Migrant to Major (1619–1800)	15
Coen and the Chinese	17
Three Institutions	19
Peace and Order	22
Migration	23
The Chinese Massacre of 1740	27
II From Migrant to Major (1800–1900)	31
Pass and District System	32
The Opium Lease System	32
The End of the Opium Lease	38
Opium Lease in Numbers	41
Consequences for the Chinese	41
The Chinese and Trade	43
Collecting and Distributing Trade Intermediaries	44
The Credit System	48
Regulating Trade	49
Bankruptcies	51
Image Forming	52
Chinese Share in Colonial Economy	53
<i>Masalah Cina</i> , or the Chinese Problem	54
III Education, Equality, and Political Awareness (1900–1942)	57
Developments	57
Chinese Nationalism and the Return to Confucianism	60
The First Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan School	61
Siang Hwee and Soe Po Sia	63
The Need for Dutch Education	65

Dutch Chinese School (HCS)	66
The Chinese Movement	68
The Pass and District System: Reform or Termination	68
The Police Court: The Case of Loa Joe Djin	70
Individual Equation (<i>Individuele Gelijkstelling</i>)	73
Dutch Subjects under Western Family Law	76
Leadership in a Changing World	77
The Rise of Political Awareness: Three Movements	79
‘Once Chinese, Always Chinese’	80
‘Loyal Subjects of Her Royal Highness the Queen’	81
‘Born and Raised in Indonesia, Dead and Buried in Indonesia’	82
Indonesian Political Organizations	83
The Visman Commission: Prospects of Change	84
IV Educational Facilities (1900–1942)	87
The Dutch Chinese School (HCS) and the Dutch Chinese Teacher Training School (HCKS)	87
The Malay Chinese School (MCS)	92
Chinese-language Schools and Dutch-language Schools	93
Dutch Secondary and Higher Education	94
V ‘Asia for the Asians’ (1942–1945)	99
Japanese and Chinese	100
Internment, Resistance, and Violence	102
Extreme Violence in Borneo	104
The Press and Chinese Organization Hua Ch’iao Chung Hui (HCCH)	106
Education and Culture	108
After the Invasion	111
Enemy Property	113
Chinese in the Japanese War Economy	115
Cooperation with Indonesian Businessmen	118
Self-sufficiency	120
Contributions, Donations, and Taxes	120
The End of the Japanese Occupation	122

VI	Between Two Fires (1945–1949)	125
	Neutrality	127
	Designated for Self-protection: The Pao An Tui	130
	Chinese Organizations	133
	Faces of Violence	135
	<i>Bersiap</i> and the British Takeover	135
	Anti-Chinese Violence in Dutch Territory	137
	Tangerang and Bagan Siapi-api	139
	The Police Actions	141
	Deaths, Disappearances, and Evacuations	150
	Material Damage	151
	The Chinese Economic Position	153
	Economic Policy	154
	Towards Transfer of Sovereignty	157
VII	Equal is Unequal (1949–1967)	159
	Indonesian Nationality: <i>Warga Negara Indonesia</i>	160
	WNI Chinese, Non-WNI Chinese, and Indigenous WNI	163
	Parliamentary Democracy (1949–1957)	163
	Economic Nationalism	164
	Economic Decolonization	167
	Guided Democracy (1957–1966)	169
	The Trade Ban PP 10/1959	170
	Indonesia's Nationality Law and the End of Dual Citizenship	172
	Integration	174
	The Assimilationists	177
	The LPKB versus Baperki	178
	After the G30S Coup	180
	Collective Name Change in Sukabumi	181
	The Dissolution of the LPKB	182
VIII	Students in the Netherlands and Other Newcomers	185
	The Chung Hwa Hui Student Association	185
	Chinese Students during the German Occupation	189
	Conflicting Post-War Directions	191

After World War II: A New Flow of Students	193
The Tail End of Dutch Education in Indonesia (1950–1961)	194
Outflow and Inflow	195
Biographical Sketches	199
Timeline	209
Notes	215
Bibliography	230
Index	235

Introduction

Without a recorded history, you will be forgotten. Without knowledge of the general history, you cannot understand your own history. This book, an initiative of the Chinese Indonesian Heritage Center Foundation (CIHC), was created with these thoughts in mind.

At some point in their lives, people with Chinese Indonesian roots may well have posed the questions ‘why, how, and what?’ with respect to their heritage. They may seek a deeper understanding and want to know more about family stories already told. These questions arise whether or not they were born in Indonesia, have close ties with their (grand)parents’ birth country, or are still familiar with the country’s language and culture.

What was behind the decision to stay, or to leave for a new life in another part of the world? These are questions related to developments in the past that influenced – or defined – the lives of past and current generations.

This book, in which the Chinese from Indonesia play a central role, provides the background and context to the many and diverse personal histories. According to the 1930 census, the Chinese made up 1.4 per cent of the population in Java and Madura, and 2 per cent of the total Dutch East Indies population. A small part of this group decided to leave Indonesia in the twentieth century. As a destination, the Netherlands was often at the top of the list due to the long-standing colonial ties and the Dutch language and education. Others made different choices and went to China, other European countries, or different parts of the world such as Australia, the US, Canada, Brazil, and Suriname. Sometimes, their migration did not end in one country, but continued on to others. The last chapter of this book describes the accounts of Chinese Indonesian migrants in the Netherlands.

The Chinese were part of Dutch history in the latter’s East Indies colony from the time the Dutch East India Company (VOC) established its first trading centre in Batavia. The first contact between the Chinese and the VOC in 1619 marked the beginning of a shared history, which, until the late nineteenth century, took place mainly in the economic sphere. From those initial VOC years in the archipelago, the role given to the Chinese within the VOC grew into an indelible position in the colonial economy. Starting at the dawn of the twentieth century, this position changed and, in addition to economics, Dutch education became an important link with the Netherlands. In their quest for more knowledge and development, Dutch education was essential for the Chinese in colonial society. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the first Chinese from Indonesia came to the Netherlands to pursue higher education.

The history of the Chinese in Indonesia described in this book begins in 1619 with the first contact mentioned above. The history I describe ends in 1966–1967, when,

in Indonesia, the period under President Sukarno ended and President Suharto's *Orde Baru* (New Order) era began. For the Netherlands, the bond with Indonesia ended several years earlier with a rift between the two countries as a result of the New Guinea issue. The territory was ceded to Indonesia in 1963. The deteriorating living environment for Chinese people in the Indonesian Republic presented them with difficult choices. Like their seventeenth-century forefathers, who were seeking a better life beyond their homeland, some of the Chinese in Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s were looking for a new future. They hoped to find it in, among other places, the Netherlands.

In describing nearly three-and-a-half centuries of history, I pay attention to developments that were important or distinctive to the Chinese in different periods. Those developments, sometimes turning points or fault lines in their history, do not necessarily have the same significance as, or coincide with, the history of the Dutch and Indonesian people or other groups. Conversely, the same is true. In addition to striving for an overview, it is also important to gain insight into the course of this history in order to better understand it. Consequently, the history of the Chinese from Indonesia has the character of a biography: a life history of a minority group. As in a biography, various aspects of the central figure's life history are highlighted, especially the significant events and experiences that shaped that life. It is a story about the pull of migration, about seizing opportunities and making a move, about dealing with adversity and success, about the pursuit of knowledge, about identity and nationality, and much more. It is a story about a population that has long lived within the tension of colonial society, in which ethnicity and differences in origin and culture were important distinguishing factors. Depending on who was in power – the Dutch, Japanese, or Indonesian – Chinese descent and culture took on different meanings at different times. This, in turn, changed the position of the Chinese in society.

The first two chapters cover the period of the VOC and that of the colonial state until the end of the nineteenth century. The Chinese economic position was formed during this period. It took shape in a society dominated by the pursuit of profit, and later revenue for the treasury. The third chapter (1900–1942) is dominated by the pursuit of education, the removal of restrictive and discriminatory regulations, and a growing political awareness. It was a period of emancipation. The fourth chapter is about education for the Chinese during this era of emancipation. This is followed by chapters on the Japanese occupation (1942–1945) and the Indonesian Revolution (1945–1949), two periods of transition towards the Indonesian Republic. The concluding chapter on the history of the Chinese as it plays out in Indonesia relates to their position as a minority in the Republik Indonesia. The last part is about the Chinese who came to the Netherlands from the late nineteenth century, mainly to study.

The history described here mainly covers the situation in Java. With its capital Jakarta (then Batavia), Java was the centre of administration and trade in the

archipelago, and government policy towards the Chinese was based on that situation. Dutch authority was not extended to the outer regions until the late nineteenth century. The general and often entirely different situation of the Chinese on other islands, such as Sumatra and Borneo, is included only insofar as it is relevant. This means, for example, that the situation of the Chinese contract workers – the ‘coolies’ on the tobacco plantations of Deli in Sumatra – is beyond the scope of this book. The same applies to the Chinese *kongsi* (business) communities¹ in Borneo.

In constructing the book, I chose for cohesion rather than completeness. The broad outline is the chronological history with attention paid within it to aspects distinctive to the Chinese in each period. The common thread is what these distinctive events meant to them. In the general Dutch historiography about the Dutch East Indies and Indonesia, the Chinese are barely mentioned. Unjustly, in my opinion, because during the centuries-long Dutch presence in the colony, and afterwards, they played an important and sometimes essential role in the economy. The same lack of attention is evident when it comes to their social role and significance. This gap in Dutch colonial and postcolonial history means that the descendants of these Chinese cannot learn about, understand, and identify with their own history, and, consequently, they cannot pass it on. Fortunately, historians and writers – within and especially beyond Dutch borders – have conducted in-depth research on specific topics and periods in the history of the Chinese in Indonesia. These publications have been informative for this book. Also of value were the personal experiences garnered from interviews with several Chinese from Indonesia, like those in the CIHC’s Oral History Archives. Biographical sketches of several Chinese figures who took important initiatives or played an important role in political or social life in the Dutch East Indies/Indonesia are also included in this book.

I am indebted and thankful to everyone who has contributed to this book. Their publications and research in different fields were invaluable to me. The same goes for those who have generously shared their personal histories, narratives, and experiences.

Terminology and Spelling

In terms of terminology and spelling, difficult choices had to be made when covering a period of nearly 350 years and three linguistic areas. Attention must be paid to political developments that led to different forms of state and regimes, and thus to different names. It is complex, for example, to deal with words that were common and embedded in laws during a certain period, but which later acquired a negative connotation and were preferably not used again. Sometimes, using these terms is unavoidable. Moreover, there are many changes due to new spelling guidelines and differences in spellings, not only in Dutch, but also in Indonesian and Chinese.

Uniformity is absent, for example, in the names of Chinese organisations. The word 'Chinese' is sometimes written as 'Tiong Hoa'; at other times it is 'Chung Hwa' or 'Tsung Hoa'. The term 'Hua Ch'iao,' which means overseas Chinese, is also used for the Chinese in Indonesia. The Chinese word for 'union' is sometimes written as 'Hui'; at other times it is 'Hwee,' depending on the use of Mandarin Chinese or the Hokkien dialect. It is impractical to give fixed rules for all these situations and spellings, or to sharply delineate when and how personal, association, geographical, place, and other names will be written in which way. For practical reasons, it has been decided to use terminology and spelling that is in accordance with what was customary in that period as much as possible. Where necessary, this is provided with a translation or explanation. Clarity and ease of reading are paramount.

Personal names of the Chinese in Indonesia are written in Romanized form as much as possible, as was customary at that time, i.e. in full and consecutively without a comma, starting with the family name: for example, Phoa Keng Hek, without a dash between the proper names. The then customary spelling for names of government leaders and high officials from China are retained, i.e. with a hyphen between the proper names, as in Chiang Kai-shek.

One general rule is that colonial terminology ended around 1942. In that terminology, for example, the Dutch were referred to as Europeans, Indonesians as 'Inlanders' or natives, and the Indies administration as the government. The Chinese, as people equated with Inlanders, fell under the group of Foreign Orientals. The new Indonesian spelling, in which, for example, the 'oe' was replaced by 'u,' is used as much as possible from 1942. The terms first and second Police Actions deserve attention. Replacement of these terms with, for example, 'military action' or 'decolonization war' is an ongoing discussion. In Indonesia, these actions are known as *Agresi Militer Belanda* (Dutch military aggression). I have chosen to continue to use the term 'Police Action' in this book. An important consideration for this is that for readers beyond the academic world – those readers I also hope to reach with this book – these terms are established concepts. I am keen to avoid ambiguity or confusion as much as possible.

The Chinese: A Heterogeneous Group

The Chinese in Indonesia could differ – sometimes greatly – from one another because, for example, they belonged to different dialect groups, such as the Hokkiens, Hakkas, or Cantonese. These groups came from different regions of China's coastal provinces. They differed from each other not only in their dialects, but also in culture. Often, different groups were active in specific segments of society. In the Indonesian archipelago, they settled in groups on different islands. In Java, the Chinese population consisted mainly of Hokkiens.

The main distinction that emerges in this book is the one between *peranakans*, the long-established Chinese, and *totoks* or *singkehs*, the newcomers. The interpretation and explanation of the term *peranakan* versus *totok* is a complex matter because of the fluid boundaries between the two groups. Three distinctions are often used to differentiate them. First, the term *peranakan* generally refers to those Chinese born in Indonesia and who have settled there for a long time. The word *peranakan* contains the word *anak*, which means child in Indonesian. The Chinese migrants who came to Indonesia over the centuries until the second half of the nineteenth century were mainly men. The children born from unions between Chinese men and local women were called *peranakans*: children of the land. These *peranakan* households and (extended) families had sometimes already settled in Indonesia for generations, and the mixed *peranakan* culture that developed had both Chinese and Indonesian elements.

Generational settlement outside China led to a second distinguishing feature: language. In general, *peranakans* no longer spoke Chinese, but used the local language, i.e. Malay. In the twentieth century, as Chinese children gained access to Dutch education, mastery of the Dutch language became more likely. Some *peranakan* children attended Dutch primary and secondary education, and some went on to Dutch higher education. It is mainly these *peranakan* Chinese from Indonesia – who spoke Dutch as well as Malay (later Indonesian) – who came to the Netherlands.

Besides being born in Indonesia and speaking the local language, descent is another important difference between *peranakans* and *totoks*. *Totoks* were considered to be of 'pure' Chinese descent. For most *totoks*, China was their country of origin, and also their country of birth. They still spoke the Chinese language, which allowed them to maintain ties with China. Culturally, they were considered to still be fully Chinese and oriented towards China.

A fourth difference between *peranakans* and *totoks* was added after the establishment of the Chinese Nationality Law in 1909. That law based Chinese nationality on descent from a Chinese father and made all Chinese, regardless of their country of birth, Chinese citizens. *Peranakans* were simultaneously Dutch subjects because of their birth in Indonesia. After the transfer of sovereignty on 27 December 1949, they became Indonesian or Dutch citizens with Chinese nationality. Thus, they had dual nationality. Most *totoks* had only Chinese nationality. These terms appear further on in the book, and I hope that this explanation provides some clarity.

As part of this CIHC initiative, several team members conducted research in certain areas. This research has been incorporated into this book. In alphabetical order: I thank Ing Lwan Taga-Tan, Boen Tan, and Yap Kioe Bing for their contribution, enthusiasm, observations, and critical comments. Kioe Bing provided the visual material that has enriched the book. I am grateful to Henk Schulte Nordholt for reading and commenting on the material relating to the 1942–1949 period. This was invaluable to me. From the beginning, the CIHC envisioned a book that had

to be accessible and easy to read, despite the relatively uncharted nature of this history, and its particular and sometimes complex aspects. This readability was important because we wanted, first and foremost, to inform our younger generations as well as a wider audience about this part of the colonial and postcolonial history of the Netherlands. Walburg Pers and its editors have made great efforts to achieve this. On behalf of the CIHC, I am very grateful to Jan-Peter Wissink, Annelies van der Meij, Lotte Akkerman, and all the other editors who were involved in this book. It was of great help to have my text seen through the eyes of others. It goes without saying that I alone am responsible for the content of this book and any shortcomings therein.

Since its release two years ago, the book has sought out and found its way to Dutch readers. With this English edition, I hope to meet the interest of readers beyond the Netherlands. I am very happy with Linawati Sidarto's vivid translation. Born and raised in Indonesia, she studied in the United States and is currently living in the Netherlands. She has worked as a journalist in Indonesia and the Netherlands, and is a valued CIHC team member.

Patricia Tjiok-Liem