



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The Decline of the Chinese Council of Batavia

Erkelens, M.

Citation

Erkelens, M. (2013, October 15). *The Decline of the Chinese Council of Batavia*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/21954>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/21954>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/21954> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Erkelens, Monique

Title: The decline of the Chinese Council of Batavia: the loss of prestige and authority of the traditional elite amongst the Chinese community from the end of the nineteenth century until 1942

Issue Date: 2013-10-15

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The discovery of the Kong Koan Archive in 1995 has created great opportunities for scholars to uncover the ins and outs of the Chinese community of Batavia and place these in the wider context of the history of the Indonesian Chinese. This study examines the Chinese community of Batavia in the early twentieth century. Although the material on the twentieth century reveals less details than those on previous centuries, there is still plenty of data to illustrate and analyse the fast-paced developments within the Chinese community in the era of modern state formation, emancipation, and nationalism between 1900 and 1942. It is unfortunate that the archives kept by the Chinese Councils of Semarang and Soerabaja have disappeared completely. Therefore, a complete comparison of Batavia, Semarang, and Soerabaja is unfeasible at this point. Yet, the archival remains of the Chinese Council of Batavia, together with Dutch archival material and newspaper sources, reveal interesting developments within the Chinese communities on Java and allow at least a partial reconstruction of Chinese society not only in Batavia but also in Semarang and Soerabaja.

Dutch policy towards the Indies Chinese was subject to many changes throughout the centuries and was quite ambiguous. After the Dutch East India Company established itself in Batavia, Chinese immigrants were encouraged to take up residence in this newly conquered city and its hinterland. The industrious Chinese proved a valuable asset for the region's economy. In the years mounting to the Chinese massacre, the High Government attempted to curb Chinese immigration to Batavia as the flood of Chinese immigrants into the town and the Ommelanden began to alarm the authorities. After the pogrom of 1740, the Chinese fled or were ousted by the Dutch, which crippled the Dutch town's ability to function. As it dawned on the Dutch that they needed the Chinese to revive the economy, their hostility waned and the situation returned to

normal. The Chinese were given a free hand in trade again and excelled as landowners, tax farmers, and operators in small-scale retail trade.

By the end of the nineteenth century, new ideas about the future of the colony and its subjects called for a change of course. The introduction of free enterprise left the colony's economy increasingly subject to market forces, while the development of modern state structures resulted in a more hands-on government. One important step of this hands-on government was the introduction of a modern tax system, which replaced the Chinese as tax farmers. It was quite a natural process: modern state formation reshuffled the position of all players in the colonial state. At the same time feelings of anxiety among the Dutch resurfaced when the Chinese dominance in Java's economy appeared threatening again. As a result, Chinese economic activities were curtailed again and laws to restrict their mobility were rigidly enforced. But after the Chinese government showed more interest in its overseas subjects in the twentieth century, the Dutch quickly lifted its restrictions and accommodated the Chinese people's needs. The constant change in policy towards the Chinese shows that the Dutch needed the Chinese, but at the same time distrusted them.

The fortunes of the institution of Chinese officers followed the constant adjustments in Dutch policy towards the Chinese. The institution was brought to life for pragmatic reasons. The Dutch needed the Chinese to contribute to the local economy, but were reluctant to show more interest in them. As long as the economy flourished and the Chinese officers kept their countrymen in check, the Dutch did not wish to become more involved in the Chinese community. After the atrocities of 1740, the High Government could not but monitor the Chinese officers more carefully. The nineteenth century was quite peaceful and the Chinese Council developed into an authoritative semi-official institution. Owing to the strict control of the Chinese officers over their countrymen, the Chinese neighbourhoods formed an organised community. This changed in the twentieth century when the Dutch introduced a hands-on policy towards their colonial possession in the East. The colonial government's increased involvement in the lives of its subjects and the burgeoning

emancipation of the groups over which they ruled had an impact on the institution of Chinese officers. The rationalisation of the bureaucracy increasingly led to the introduction of a more efficient, business-like administration with leaders who were legitimately chosen. Tradition, feudal concepts and nepotism were no more the ideal prerequisites for a position of leadership in the community. The Chinese officers were therefore targeted. Virulent criticism directed at the traditional leaders of the Chinese and the governmental take-over of their tasks made the Chinese officers more and more unwanted and redundant. In the end, the colonial government wished to rule directly over the Chinese, thereby hinting at abolishing the Chinese officers once and for all.

The Indies Chinese were well aware of the ambiguous attitude of the government. Chinese distrust towards the ruling class ran deep, and it was this distrust that saved the Chinese Council of Batavia. Amidst the turbulent developments of the early twentieth century, it was the Chinese Council that secured Chinese interests. Its officers administered the properties of the Chinese community, saw to it that order was maintained in the neighbourhoods, and fulfilled an important social welfare role. Although in the twentieth century the Chinese officers became the target of Chinese nationalists and an increasing number of tasks were taken over by the colonial government, in Batavia the Chinese Council still helped sustain an organised Chinese community, and was in general able to ward off Dutch and native antagonism, and the aggressive Sino-centric activists. When the colonial government, increasingly zealous about treating its subjects more equally, proposed abolishing the Chinese Council and placing the Chinese people under its direct administration, the Batavian Chinese were quick to reject the plan. As long as the Chinese were not elevated to the same status as the Dutch, they were still at the mercy of the government's whims. The Chinese Council was a symbol of Chinese self-determination and the Chinese officers were important guardians of this. Without the institution of Chinese officers, all affairs of the Chinese would be in the hands of the Dutch, whom they distrusted. Therefore the system was worth fighting

for, as it constituted their last form of self-reliance. If anything was to change, the Chinese community wanted more control over the Council and its properties, and transparency in its affairs.

Dutch efforts to rationalise city administration were thwarted by ethnic animosities, cutbacks, and lack of consensus among government officials about what to do. Their lack of awareness of what was really going in their colony is manifest from the reaction of the Indies Chinese to their plans, and the authorities' surprise at it. In 1927 the Chinese Council of Batavia was resurrected and its officers were given the green light for resuming their activities with the assistance of private members. Although the Chinese wanted equal status with the Dutch they settled for control over their own affairs and (relative) autonomy. At this stage the Council increasingly operated as it had in the old days, when the emphasis was on its social tasks. After almost a decade of inactivity during the Japanese occupation and the early years of independence, the Chinese Council of Jakarta tried to resume its duties with the appointment of ten new members and a new building. However, within a few years the Indonesian Republic had confiscated most of its properties and assumed most of its social functions. At the end of the 1950s the Council was nothing more than a temple and cremation association. After exercising administrative control over the Chinese community for two centuries, the activities of the Chinese Council slowly came to an end.