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## Tionghoa Peranakan Pre-war Novels: Freeing from the Past and the Colonial, and Embracing Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

*The loyalty of the Tionghoa Peranakan (local-born Chinese) in Indonesia has often been considered circumspect. It has been the hypothesis of much research on the reasons for the racial riots that often resulted in the victimisation of the Tionghoa Peranakan. This article offers a glimpse of their various loyalties through an analysis of novels that are still available and were written by the Tionghoa Peranakan between 1903 and 1910, the pre-war period of the Dutch East Indies. These novels reveal some of the reasons for the Tionghoa Peranakan's decisions on their future and Indonesian identity. Factors both historical and pertaining to a migrant milieu played a part in changing their point of reference from China and the Netherlands to Indonesia. Clinging onto a past that was unreliable and cruel was not a choice just as gravitating towards a retreating Dutch was not feasible. While it appears that the Tionghoa Peranakan eventually cast their loyalty for Indonesia for economic reasons, the novels show that their migrant background had resulted in disillusionment with both China and the Dutch imperialists.*

*Key words: Tionghoa Peranakan, novels, Indonesian identity, migrant background, Dutch imperialist*

### ABSTRAK

*Kesetiaan Tionghoa Peranakan (orang Cina kelahiran tempatan) di Indonesia telah banyak kali dianggap meragukan. Ia telah menjadi hipotesis banyak kajian tentang sebab-sebab rusuhan kaum yang selalunya menyebabkan Tionghoa Peranakan menjadi mangsa. Makalah ini menyingkap beberapa aspek kesetiaan mereka melalui analisis beberapa buah novel yang masih terdapat dan ditulis oleh orang Tionghoa Peranakan antara 1903 dan 1910, iaitu zaman sebelum perang Hindia Timur Belanda. Novel-novel tersebut menyerlahkan sesetengah daripada sebab keputusan Tionghoa Peranakan tentang masa depan mereka dan identiti kerakyatan Indonesia. Kedua-dua faktor sejarah dan persekitaran migran memainkan peranan dalam mengubah titik rujukan mereka dari China dan Belanda kepada Indonesia. Pergantungan pada masa lepas yang tidak boleh dipercayai dan ganas bukanlah merupakan satu pilihan seperti juga tidak mungkin bergantung harap kepada Belanda*

*yang sedang berundur. Walaupun kelihatan akhirnya orang Tionghoa Peranakan lebih setia kepada Indonesia atas sebab ekonomi, novel-novel tersebut menunjukkan bahawa latar belakang migran mereka telah menghampakan kedua-dua pihak China dan imperialis Belanda.*

*Kata kunci: Tionghoa Peranakan, novel, identiti Indonesia, latar belakang migran, imperialis Belanda*

## INTRODUCTION

Suffering from a diasporic milieu (Ong 1850: iv) and indulging in hedonistic imperial vices, the Chinese who arrived in the East Indies before the Dutch in 1596 (Purcell 1951: 449, 458), were said to have multiplied from 400 in 1619 to 10,000 after 1725. The Chinese traders who sailed on the order of Emperor Suen-Tih (Xundé r.1425-1435) of the Ming dynasty to the East Indies swiftly managed to improve their socio-economic status (Purcell 1951: 4). The Chinese diaspora has resulted in national hybrids such as the Chinese Indonesians or the *Tionghoa peranakan* as they will henceforth be referred to in this article. *Tionghoa* (Hokkien) or *Zhonghua* in Mandarin, is derived from the word *Zhongguo* (the centre of the earth) and *Hua* is a name given to the group of people who used to live by the banks of the Yellow River in China (Dahana 2000: 33). *Peranakan* (Ind.) when merged with the word *Tionghoa* means ‘local-born Chinese but not a native’. Although *Tionghoa* is said to have emerged only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Suryadinata 2003: 88), this research will defer to the preference of the present Chinese Indonesians rather than history.

By the 1900s the Chinese in Indonesia were openly divided into the *totok* who practised their Chinese culture and spoke *Guoyü* (Mandarin) and the *Tionghoa Peranakan* who spoke in Low Malay<sup>1</sup>. As descendants of mixed marriages between the Chinese and the locals, the *Tionghoa peranakan* spoke a syncretic form of Malay with loan words from the local native dialect, Dutch, Hokkien (a southern Chinese dialect from Fujian province) and practised mixed cultures. Ong (1850) observed that the diaspora affected cultural changes in the language, food, dress and even religion of those Chinese who chose to stay in the East Indies. Despite their differences from the *totok*, the native or colonial animosity towards the Chinese did not discriminate between them. This explains the implication of the *Tionghoa Peranakan* in triggering political instability

in Indonesia during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The animosity that surfaced was partially caused by the *totok* who persisted in viewing China as their homeland through their involvement in the nationalist movement in China (Purcell 1951: 448-75).

A literary survey of Indonesian pre-war history reveals that the Chinese of the East Indies felt that they had been unfairly treated by the Dutch colonial regime especially where socio-economic laws and status were concerned (Suryadinata 1978: 116-17, 1993: 57; Williams 1960: 28). These included the affirmative action of the Dutch administration presumably to protect the native from the 'greed' of the Chinese. The imposition of residential restrictions on the Chinese from 1835 till 1919 limited the Chinese residential areas to the *wijken* (residential zone designated for the Chinese immigrants) and affected their businesses as a pass or *passenstelsel* (a pass) (Somers 1964: 1-2; Williams 1960: 28-29) was required in order to leave the *wijken*. The Chinese also perceived these restrictions as attempts to curb their freedom. The Ethical Policy which replaced the *Cultuurstelsel* or Culture System from 1900 onwards also provoked frustration and financial loss which were borne by the Chinese. Lea Williams (1960: 24) observed that the 'Ethical program's efforts to improve the position of the Indonesians...[was in fact] native betterment at Chinese expense.' It became obvious to the Chinese that they were the convenient scapegoats sought by the Dutch administration to absolve itself from the escalating poverty and dissension among the natives. The racial riots that began as early as 1740 with the 'Batavian Fury' where thousands of Chinese were reportedly annihilated by the Dutch in efforts to curb the unrest (Purcell 1951: 468) caused by the Chinese *kapitein* (captain) who apparently threatened the colonial position (Suryadinata 1993: 81) only proved that the Dutch had succeeded in casting the Chinese in Indonesia as the 'bogey man' of the East Indies economy.

Consequently, the accumulated anger and frustration of the Chinese towards the Dutch administration needed outlets. Some of the Chinese reacted by seeking closer kinship ties with either their motherland (China) or the East Indies. These events have been identified by historians as a period of overseas Chinese nationalism (Williams 1960; Coppel 1983). Through the years Chinese Indonesian politics has manifested itself in political parties such as *Chung Hwa Hui* (1928), *Partai Tionghoa Indonesia* (1932) (Suryadinata 1981: 64) and *Baperki* (1954) championing individual perspectives. However, this article is focused on the anger and related frustration that were manifested in written form.

These views began appearing in the newspapers that cropped up in 1869 such as *Mataharie*, *Selomporet Melaju* in 1888 followed by *Bintang Soerabaia* in 1887 (Watson 1971: 424), *Bintang Betawi* (1905) and many more (Ahmad Adam 1995: 77) with *Tionghoa peranakan* newspapers such as *Djawa Tengah* (1901) and *Sin Po* (1910) (A. Wahab Ali 1984: 146). Since open dissension was not an option, the Chinese inserted their critical, often seditious anti-colonial views in these dailies (A. Wahab Ali 1984: 147). Interestingly, they were also disguised in the fiction stories that were published daily, weekly or bi-monthly. These were then compiled as novels by the printing presses that mushroomed from 1899 (Ahmad Adam 1995: 77). It is these stories that appear to be mere entertainment fare that is the focus of this article.

During the economic crisis of 1884, the *Tionghoa peranakan* acquired publishing houses to compensate for the loss of income from the falling prices of sugar and coffee (Ahmad Adam 1995: 59). With restrictions on their mobility affecting their trade, they sought other sources of revenue. Considering the plethora of native languages spoken by the different groups of natives, it was a challenging, if not impossible, task to select one language to represent such diverse people. According to Ahmad Adam (1995: 58) after the first appearance of the Javanese weekly *Bromartani*, the *Tionghoa peranakan* voice emerged in 1869 with the advent of Lo Tun Tay, as the editor of the bi-weekly newspaper, *Mataharie*. Subsequently, the number of *Tionghoa peranakan* presses multiplied and provided a platform for literary growth that rapidly established a written power which allowed them to express their dissatisfaction (Ahmad Adam 1995: 77). Daily newspapers communicated the conditions of the *Tionghoa Peranakan* from Batavia to Probolinggo. The history of publication in the East Indies reflects the persistence of the Chinese in the pursuit of a “voice” amidst Dutch colonized East Indies. Their aggressiveness in applying themselves to the publishing trade implies more than an economic interest. This is especially clear when set against the low socio-political status of the Chinese in the East Indies. Nio Joe Lan (1962: 19) describes the publishing houses as *sekolah bagi bahasa Melaju-rendah* (schools for Low-Malay) as prior to 1900, the Chinese in the East Indies received no formal education<sup>2</sup> since there was none offered by the Dutch colonial regime. The first publishing houses may have been established by the Dutch, but it was the Chinese community, in particular the *Tionghoa Peranakan*, who were the driving force of the industry after the economic crisis of 1884 led to the bankruptcies of the oldest newspapers in East Indies. Having acquired numerous publishing

houses they produced 3,005 works (Salmon 1984a: xv) from late 19th century to the 1960s<sup>3</sup>. These included: 73 plays, 183 syair, 233 translations from western texts, 759 translations from Chinese texts, and 1,398 novels and short stories. The authors were also interested in promoting and improving their language which was Low Malay.

The novels that are of concern here are those written prior to World War I from 1903 to 1942 which reflected their struggle with issues of identity during the turbulent period. They were fast becoming more resentful of the Dutch colonialists and less enamoured with their 'motherland' (China). Deep in the 1910 revolution, China had actively campaigned for financial as well as moral support from overseas Chinese which included them. The Chinese pandered to the need for the sense of belonging that assailed a number of the *Tionghoa Peranakan* by declaring all overseas Chinese as Chinese citizens. However China's defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1895 and the Boxer Uprising of 1899-1900 affected the confidence of the *Tionghoa Peranakan* in their support of China which some viewed as their motherland and the source of their identity. Coupled with the social policies that circumvented the physical and social freedom of the Chinese in the East Indies the historical developments outside of the colony simultaneously spurred the resentment against the Dutch colonialists and the freedom fighters in China (Kwee 1972: 4) whose superiority came into question after the defeat of Russia and China by Japan in 1905.

These events were significant as the two hegemonic powers that influenced the Chinese in the East Indies became fallible and questionable. Avenues of protection emanating from China or the Netherlands appeared to be less attractive. The search for ways to represent themselves was spurred by the entrance of the Indo-European's<sup>4</sup> entrance into nationalist politics in 1916 and their own political marginalisation in view of the Indo-European's marginal status. Leo Suryadinata's portraiture of Liem Koen Han, the founder of the *Partai Tionghoa Peranakan* is an example of the political marginalisation of the *Tionghoa Peranakan* who felt oppressed by the Dutch as they were not given the right to choose to be Chinese or Dutch nationals when the Nationality Law was imposed (1993: 57 & 59). Liem was responsible for the concept of 'Indonesierchap'<sup>5</sup> when he was editor-in-chief of *Sin Tit Po*. He felt that the *Tionghoa Peranakan* had to cooperate with the *pribumi* for self-governance in Indonesia. He also realised that the *Tionghoa Peranakan* who chose to be with China politically, would be left out economically.

Liem's action is a reflection on the number of *Tionghoa Peranakan* who decided on allegiance to their adopted land rather than China. This choice became more imminent. Kwee Tek Hoay (1972: 3), for example, felt that the *Tionghoa Peranakan* were not particularly attracted to events in China. Such a claim is supported by Wang Gungwu (1991: 143) who felt that 'the Nanyang Chinese who lived under European rulers during the heyday of nineteenth-century European nationalism did not produce nationalists on their own' and staunch promoters of Chinese reforms such as Li Teng-Hui of Bogor, Java or Lim Boon Keng of Singapore were not noted for their nationalist allegiance towards China. According to Grief (1988: 4), Chinese nationalism did not generate the patriotic response that was expected.

Nevertheless, the *Tionghoa Peranakan* were not spared the angst of the diasporic milieu. The struggle between identifying with China or the East Indies is reflected in the novels written in this era. The early *Tionghoa Peranakan* novels that were published in 1903 are *Oeij-Se* by Thio Tjien Boen (1903), *Lo Fen Koei* by Gouw Peng Liang (1903), *Njai Alimah* by Oei Soei Tiong (1904), *Pembalesan Kedji* by Hau San Liang (1907) and *Sie Po Giok* by Tio Ie Soei (1912). All these novels contain themes that looked back to the 'past', questioning and critiquing the Chinese past and identity. When the educated *Tionghoa Peranakan* were faced with growing animosity towards the Chinese as a whole as demonstrated in the riots of 1912 and 1918, their initial response was to look to China for support and protection. Their works are didactic in style, aiming to impart morals according to the teachings of Confucius, whose philosophical teachings, moral wisdom and political writings helped in 'remembering' China (Fung 1976). Highlighting the moral decay of the *Tionghoa Peranakan* such as gambling in *Oeij-Se*, irresponsibility in *Pembalesan Kedji*, and hedonistic pursuits in *Sie Po Giok*, the *Tionghoa peranakan* novels appear ostensibly as didactic criticisms of prevailing Chinese hedonism. They were aimed at halting the progressive moral decadence of the Chinese in the East Indies through a commendation of Confucianism. The presence of *Hikajat Khonghoetjoe* by Lie Kim Hok which appeared as early as 1897 supported the embracing of ancient Chinese teachings such as Confucianism to solve the problems of the overseas Chinese. It is also a well-known fact that the nationalistic reform movements of early 20th-century China were financed by overseas Chinese which explained China's keenness to help resinicise the *Tionghoa peranakan* during this period (Kwee 1972: 4; Grief 1988: 4).

## REDRESSAL OF THE PAST: THE RISE OF FEMALE EMANCIPATION

Upon closer scrutiny, the novels which appear to be championing a return to the Confucius ideal of living righteously as practiced by the protagonists' ancestors in China are also an attempt to break free from the past through a metaphorical re-visitation of it. The plots dwell on the failure to find happiness and peace by obeying edicts or practicing traditional beliefs. Often the protagonists' sojourn into the past did not yield a point of reference which these heirs of a migrant history in the East Indies sought. Instead they find freedom and identity by recanting the past through actions that deny or defy the past or representations of the past. These are observations of the changing treatment of plots and characters in the novels from 1903 to 1942. The evidence appear to be more of an attempt at redressal of the past through sentimental yet censorious perceptions of traditional practices rather than a promotion of China during the pre-war era in the East Indies.

An example of this redressal is found in the revision of the traditional Chinese patriarchy that arrived on the shores of East Indies with the first Chinese male migrants. Relegated to a life of servitude and silenced like a shadow to the menfolk (Siddharta 2002: 149-50), the *Tionghoa Peranakan* heroine plays a secondary role both as author and character in the novels written mostly by men at this period of time. According to Salmon (1984b: 152), of the 800 *Tionghoa Peranakan* writers, only 30 were women, whose literary works were officially noted in 1924 with the publication of poetry followed by the first translations of Chinese novels written by women. In this period there were only 13 women of whom only 8 were writers while the rest were translators. The numbers increased as more *Tionghoa Peranakan* women were educated (Salmon 1984b: 156).

For the *Tionghoa Peranakan* male writer between 1903 and 1910, the ideal woman is one who is submissive, loyal and patient towards her elders, especially her father who decides her future (Coppel 1997: 24-26). The ideal *Tionghoa Peranakan* woman is a reflection of the Chinese woman of the past. She is the servile, docile and silent individual who has no power over her future like the character, Bong Lan in *Pembalesan Kedji*. Bong Lan is a 14 year old orphan living with her abusive aunt and has to do all the house-chores uncomplainingly. Her long-suffering attitude is praised and earns her character a place beside the ideal male, Hoedjin, son of Hoaij Wan. Others like Sim Kim Nio, the indolent, complaining

wife of the hero Souw Gi Tong in *Lo Fen Koei* is removed in a fatal poisoning to make way for the new bride, Tan San Nio who has dutifully honoured her father's wishes by marrying the man of her father's choice.

In the novels of the period discussed, there are few if any *Tionghoa Peranakan* female characters. They are merely shadows or appendages to the plot. For instance, in *Lo Fen Koei* there are many women but not one is given a platform to speak. Tan San Nio and Laij Nio, both the object of desire of *Lo Fen Koei*, are led by the decisions their father or a man makes. They are literally rendered silent by their non-speaking roles in the novels. Without any means to care for themselves the womenfolk are subject to domination from their male counterparts. San Nio is driven to hide herself in the household of a local judge called Souw Gi Tong, while Laij Nio, with her husband driven to jail by *Lo Fen Koei*, has no choice but to acquiesce to the fiend's protection. At this point it is clear that the patriarchy wants the assurance that *Tionghoa Peranakan* women who represent the remnants of a precious link to the past, will continue with this submissive role. Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1996: 4) remark that 'the central claim that Otherness is projected onto women by, and in the interests of, men, such that we are constructed as inferior or abnormal' appears to be a valid observation of *Tionghoa Peranakan* writers of this period.

The novels mainly written by men, generally revolve around men. The male heroes are either in the process of enlightenment or about to embark on a journey of redemption. Aside from there being no heroines in stories like *Oeij-Se* where the only *Tionghoa Peranakan* woman is Oeij-Se's wife, other works like *Sie Po Giok* feature a silent aunt of Sie Po Giok who is often referred as encim (aunt) or 'hujin Sie Thian Be' (wife of Sie Thian Be), and Kim Nio, Sie Po Giok's nine year old cousin with a soft spot for him. The females are either old or too young to be of consequence to the hero or the development of plot that revolves around the hero. Most of these female characters play such a minor role that they appear only in a handful of pages before they are conveniently written out of the story. For example, while Oeij-Se's wife does not appear again after he returns to literally turn her tears into joy when he throws money on the floor next to her (Thio 1903: 22-23). Sie Po Giok's encim, only appears in episodes that require food preparation for presentation to relatives or to plead with her husband to stop from further abusing Sie Po Giok. In the meantime, Kim Nio is always there when Sie Po Giok needs a shoulder to cry on but not in the thick of the action. She is portrayed as helpless when it comes to protecting Sie Po Giok from her father's wrath



and her brother's cruelty. Women, particularly married women, were kept to the domestic sphere and encouraged to see themselves as weak compared to men.

To ensure that their female characters are kept in their place, the *Tionghoa Peranakan* male writers were not above inflicting violence upon them on paper. The *Tionghoa Peranakan* woman's humanity is denied in one-dimensional characters and overshadowed by her sexual role in a man's life. The women are either trophy wives, melancholic unfaithful mistresses or materialistic, grasping characters. An example of these demeaning characters is found in *Pembalesan Kedji* where Soan Nio is sold by her aunt to Kek Soen, a rich but useless businessman. She is trapped like an animal in a house he has asked an old indigenous woman to rent, awaiting the male predator who sexually violates her. It is obvious that the male author has no idea of the impact of such violence on an individual much less a woman, as there is no indication of any attempt to escape or struggle in the aftermath of the rape. Kek Soen reasons with Soan Nio, tempting her with material goods and a life without hardship which the readers are expected to accept as reasons for contentment. The reader, especially a female reader, would find it equally difficult to believe that she would receive his son without his knowledge in the same capacity later in the story. Her character suffers another violent blow when she is written off as having run away after Kek Soen's wealth has diminished. The kind of violence inflicted upon Soan Nio's character by the male protagonists and the male author is to be regarded as a violent act of sexual domination over women. In 'Lo Fen Koei' all the women characters, like Laij Nio and Soan Nio, are sexual objects rather than human beings with social and emotional needs. Salmon (1984b: 49) aptly describes the *Tionghoa Peranakan* women when she says: 'They are like a trophy to be won and forgotten in these stories.' Thus the depiction of women characters in the novels reflect the lowly status of women in the *Tionghoa Peranakan* men's mind.

An exception to the novels that seem to sacrifice the female custodian of the past to prevent distillation of their patriarchal tradition is Oei Soei Tiong's *Njai Alimah*. which overturns the miasma of committing women to drudgery. Written in 1908, the personification of the East Indies in the heroine *Njai Alimah* is not lost upon the reader. She not only marries a Dutch, but also manages to live happily ever after at the end of the tale. In defying the patriarchal setting of his colleagues, the author deliberately sets her up to be the ideal woman, understanding at this early stage the implications of the role of women in relation to a nation. Loomba (1998:

215) observes that ‘To begin with, across the colonial spectrum, the nation-state or its guiding principles are often imagined literally as a woman.’ *Njai Alimah* is thus the new woman and a source of inspiration for the cultural and traditional changes taking place within the *Tionghoa Peranakan* community. *Njai Alimah*’s heroic efforts which include overcoming corrupt and callous men, testifies to a change in the perception of women as a whole. *Njai Alimah* belonged to the lowest levels of subalternism as she is not only female but also a native female normally hidden in the folds of *Tionghoa Peranakan* texts appearing on the margins as *babu* (nanny) or servant in the stories. Being the heroine of a novel in this initial period attests to the changes that were not only happening to the nation but to the *Tionghoa Peranakan* since the portrayal of *Njai Alimah* went against social and racial norms of the conservative *Tionghoa Peranakan* at that point in time.

That Oei’s novel was accepted for publication leaves us to conclude that the burgeoning signs of feminism that threatened the traditions upheld by an ancestral past are the beginnings of a dismantling of past institutions or established ‘truths’ marked by the deliberate discussion of taboo subjects such as women’s own choice of life partners, interracial marriages and having careers. Historically, this period also points to the first participation of *Tionghoa Peranakan* women in the writing and publishing trade previously dominated by the *Tionghoa peranakan* men. Salmon (1984a: 34) reports that:

*Kira-kira pada tahun 1906, K.P. Nio menerbitkan sebuah syair di Bogor yang bertujuan meningkatkan emansipasi wanita dan diberi judul: Boekoe sair boewat kemadjoean bangsa Tionghoa fihak prampoean.*

(About 1906, K.P. Nio published a syair in Bogor which was aimed at promoting women’s emancipation entitled ‘A book of syair about Tionghoa women’s progress’.)

The strength of character evinced in a female protagonist such as *Njai Alimah* much less someone who is foreign to the writer, is a mark of departure from the whole patriarchal past of the *Tionghoa Peranakan* community. This was the beginning of the fostering of a new identity for the *Tionghoa Peranakan* who at this stage struggled to confront the reality of their identity in an effort to purge themselves from a past that was fast fading from their migrant minds.

## UNRAVELLING OF STEREOTYPES

The diasporic milieu of the *Tionghoa Peranakan* is closely linked to identity. The plots and characters of the *Tionghoa Peranakan* novels of this period also appear to lament and yet defend the treachery and debauchery of the Chinese. These can be translated as a milieu that uprooted people face when abandoning an ancestral past in their quest for a new identity that is closer to the reality in which they live.

The ‘identity’ of the Chinese in East Indies history has always been connected to the economy (Photo 1) as they were not only industrious traders, but profitable clients that the English and Dutch discovered in their interactions with them as trading partners.

The Chinese were both useful and a hindrance to the Dutch colonial regime. Purcell (1951: 455) reports that:

During the siege of Ja[karta] in 1619, Chinese were employed, using the Chinese language as a medium, to act as intermediaries in arranging the capitulation to the Dutch by the *Pangeran* or native ruler, as nobody in the fort knew how to read or write the Javanese language.



Photo 1. Early pictorial depictions of the Chinese in Java trying to sell his wares to a local native

Source: Koleksi Foto Perpustakaan Nasional Indonesia Album 20 201.5

Grief (1988: 1) adds that the *Tionghoa Peranakan* were usually used as an intermediary in daily business transactions (Figure 1) such as 'shopkeeping, money-lending, tax-farming, wholesaling, and in other comprador roles'. Coppel's (1983: 5) conclusion of the negative projection of the Chinese in the East Indies from writings about them is that they were 'dishonourable, opportunistic and greedy immigrants' whose enterprising nature often became 'an impediment to the Dutch who viewed them with a jaundiced eye' (Thompson 2001: 46). Their inherent loyalty to their traditional customs and religious culture which contradicted their passion for gambling as well as sexual vices did not appeal to the Dutch. But, their skills at sea and communication as well as trade coupled with their resilient nature, made them indispensable to the Dutch (Purcell 1951: 456). So, it came as no surprise that the Dutch were not interested in the social development of the Chinese in their colony. Purcell (1951: 459) states:

From the beginning the company's policy (like that of the British in Malaya) was to interfere with the life of the Chinese only in matters in which it had a direct material interest, and beyond that to leave them to their own devices and the management of their own affairs. The intermediaries between the Dutch and the Chinese were headmen of the latter community (appointed by the Dutch) whose title was later 'Captain or Chief of the Chinese'.

This was not to be in the second half of the 18th century when the Chinese were dispossessed of their power to levy taxes on the indigenous people and forbidden from mingling with the locals. They were labelled as socially and morally detrimental to the natives and abusive in carrying out their duties for the Dutch. It was both convenient and financially prudent for the Dutch to create a negative perception of the Chinese who were contracted to be in direct contact with the native. The Chinese formed the social buffer between the indigenous people and the Dutch and allowed the Dutch to absolve themselves from the socio-economic woes in the colony. By deflecting criticism and concentrating on Chinese vices such as gambling, smuggling and sexual immorality they helped to create a villainous picture of the Chinese.

Through their novels the *Tionghoa Peranakan* attempted to change this negative image which was alienating them from the *pribumi* community. Their novels propelled the *Tionghoa Peranakan* towards the social centre as the protagonists were played out against a peripheral backdrop of Dutch and *pribumi* characters. The authors portrayed their

protagonists as capable of a great sense of honour, courage and justice, like the *kapitein* in *Lo Fen Koei*, or remorseful as the character Siouw Gi Tong demonstrates. Moulding their heroes to the likes of Sherlock Holmes with a native as Dr Watson, the *Tionghoa Peranakan* writer Juvenile Kuo ventured into the crime genre featuring Oeij Tjnn Hin and his side-kick Drachman in *Hermine Oen: Pentjoerian dari Sepasang Giwang jang berharga 20.000 dollars*. The *Tionghoa Peranakan* were also exposed to Sherlock Holmes novels through the translations. Instead of the untrustworthy Chinese with a queue who is either a gangster full of vices or a rough-edged coolie, the character Oei who lives in Singapore is the 'new' *Tionghoa Peranakan* – educated and with strong moral integrity. This portrayal of Oei aimed at overturning the prejudiced representations that have led to stereotypes of the *Tionghoa Peranakan*.

The novels brought the *Tionghoa Peranakan* from their marginal positions as subalterns to the literary centre. The greedy and demeaning Oeij-Se who has no qualms about cheating European traders and the *pribumi* for love of money in Oeij-Se is duly punished. Thio's evocation of the popular myth of the Chinese trader who enriches himself by duping the native who had duplicitously procured the money from a European, is given a different treatment. Instead of the Chinese trader who makes a profit by nefarious means and gets away with it, Oeij-Se is punished for shamefully betraying the trust of a *pribumi*. Oeij-Se's daughters defy their father by eloping with Muslim natives and he is denied progeny. His daughters' defiance is perceived as a betrayal of Confucian principles where a woman's obedience to her father is unquestionable especially where her future husband is concerned (Siddharta 2002: 149-151). Thio adds a twist to his plot in the rejection of the rich Chinese master promoted by the Dutch regime and who is a predator of the unsuspecting native. The stereotype of the rich Chinese merchant lording it over the native is duly depicted in Photo 2 of a Chinese man carried by two native in a litter.

Other stereotypes include that of the villainous Chinese autocratic leader and the drug baron which is a reference to Chinese involvement in opium smuggling in Java (Trocki 2002: 305) and the tiko (Chinese gang leaders) in the tin mines of Bangka who are involved in criminal activities (Heidhues 1992: 78-79) have also been taken up by the *Tionghoa Peranakan* writers. *Lo Fen Koei*, a protagonist who is an example of the corrupt autocratic Chinese created by Gouw Peng Liang is duly punished and brought to justice. Lo, a drug lord from Benawan succeeds in framing a poor vegetable farmer and a tailor with packages of opium



Photo 2. Chinese merchant carried by natives in a litter

Source: Koleksi Foto Perpustakaan Nasional Indonesia Album 20 202.8

planted on their premises to enable him to procure the farmer's beautiful daughter, Tan San Nio. Lo is later brought to justice by a *Tionghoa Peranakan*, a *kapitein* and an employee who is the antithesis in being the ideal Chinese. In another story that runs parallel to that of Lo, Siouw Gi Tong plots to procure a tailor's attractive wife Poei Lai Nio only to repent his actions at the end. The heroes of these parallel stories are Siouw and Oeij Ko Beng (a writer employed by Siouw) who had the courage to be responsible for their actions and stand up for truth and justice. But before Lo can be prosecuted, he shoots himself. Gouw Peng Liang caps his didactic novel with two wise sayings, 'Ingetlah Pembaca! Barang siapa menggali lobang buat laen orang yang tiada berdosa, niscaya akhirnya ialah yang masuk sendiri, seperti cerita ini' (Remember readers! Whoever digs a hole for a sinless person will himself be buried in it at the end like that in my story). Gouw's subtle warning to the Dutch imperialists embedded in moralistic tones is not lost upon the reader.

Honourable heroes such as Juvenile Kuo's Oeij Tjhin Hin in *Hermine Oen: Pentjoerian dari Sepasang Giwang jang berharga 20.000 dollars* (1927) tamper negative perceptions of the *Tionghoa peranakan*. The repentant Siouw (Gouw 1903) and the protagonist Sie Po Giok in Tio's novel of the same title are binary opposites of the drug baron Lo (Gouw 1903) and Kek Soen (Tio 1912). They question the colonial stereotypes

of the Chinese in the East Indies. The authors claim in their prologues that their plots are based on real incidents in Benawan (Java) which were reported in the local dailies like *Bintang Betawi*.

The *Tionghoa Peranakan* writers' attempts to change the established perception of their community were helped by the changes that were apparent in the mixed cultural traditions that they practised. Customs that were long held as part of being Chinese which included the **tow-chang** (Hokkien for the queue) imposed by the Manchus on their Chinese subjects in China were not worn by the *Tionghoa Peranakan*. Purcell cites Schouten (1951: 460) who observed that 'When at length it was cut off their whole countenance was changed and they were covered with infamy to such a point that the other Chinese refused to speak to them.' By renouncing the queue the *Tionghoa Peranakan* were also risking their own safety. It was a public declaration to free themselves from their traditional Chinese identity. This is echoed in the failed programmes by the association, *Tiong Hoa Hui Goan* (THHK) which in 1905 tried to re-sinicise the *Tionghoa Peranakan* through Chinese education. Suryadinata (1978: 9) reports that while the totok were keen on sending their children to the THHK schools, the *Tionghoa Peranakan* sent theirs to Dutch schools. This implied that they were beginning to identify themselves as Indonesians and not Chinese as declared by Liem Koen Hian in *Sin Tit Po*, 26 August 1932 (Suryadinata 1978: 94):

Since we consider this country as our motherland, feel and think as Indonesier and are prepared to take the responsibilities for this country with the indigenous people who are the race of our mothers, therefore, we are already Indonesier.

In the process of challenging the established perceptions of the *Tionghoa Peranakan* the authors also counter the colonial image of the *pribumi* as weak and subservient. The protagonist *Njai Alimah* in the novel of the same name by Oei outwits her kidnappers and would-be suitors including the local gangster, without the help of her Dutch fiancé. She is significantly the heroine of the story which is a rare occurrence as *Tionghoa Peranakan* writers were generally still immersed in racist patriarchal teachings. Colonial authority in such novels were embodied in such characters as the weak Lort (Oei 1904), suicidal Vigni (Gouw 1903) and a dead European (Thio 1903) murdered by the native for his treasure.

Writing in *Melajoe Tionghoa* also marked a change in the perception of the *Tionghoa Peranakan* as singularly different from the established stereotypes of the Chinese in the East Indies. By speaking in *Melajoe*

*Tionghoa* in their community they not only differed from other Chinese but it also drew them closer to the *pribumi*. It is significant that contextually *Melajoe Tionghoa* resembles the Javanese language (Wolff 1997: 29). According to Nio Joe Lan (1961: 119):

*Dengan tjiptaan itu [bahasa Melajo Tionghoa] sastera Indonesia-tionghoa menjelami dunia pikiran bangsa Indonesia. Dan itu menunjukkan pula, bahwa dengan hidup dibumi Indonesia penulis Tionghoa-peranakan memberikan perhatian besar kepada bangsa Indonesia. Perhatian besar itu membuat mereka dapat memasuki alam semangat bangsa Indonesia dan timbullah hasrat pada mereka untuk menuliskan tjerita-2 dengan peran-2 indonesia tanpa ditjampuri orang-2 berbangsa lain.*

(With the creation of the language the Indonesian-Tionghoa literature has delved into the world of the Indonesian people. This also shows that the Tionghoa Peranakan who live in Indonesia pay a lot of attention to the Indonesian race. It is this close attention that allows the Tionghoa Peranakan to penetrate the world view of the Indonesian race and write about the Indonesians without interruption from other races.)

Additionally, the linguistic power play between the characters of the major ethnic groups in the Dutch colony and the inclusion of the native in the novels indicate that the authors had a political agenda to prevent the Dutch creating divisions among the major communities. In the novels, *Melajoe Tionghoa* was limited to communication between *Tionghoa Peranakan* and other indigenous ethnic groups. But, the former would converse in the ethnic language when necessary as in the case of Drono, the little thief in *Oeij-Se*. With Drono, *Oeij-Se* lapses into bahasa Sunda (p. 34) but switches back to bahasa *Melajoe Tionghoa* (pp. 40-41). The author, Thio, chooses to distinguish the different languages as he translates the conversations between Drono and *Oeij-Se* into *Melajoe Tionghoa* after each dialogue between Drono and *Oeij-Se* (Thio 1903: 34-35; 40-41). In *Njai Alimah* (Oei 1904: 491), the conversations between Encik Amat, the jewel trader and Lort, the Dutch administrator, and the factory owner's wife who is Dutch, are in *Melajoe Tionghoa*, but only between themselves. In one exchange between *Njai Alimah*, Lort, the Dutch factory owner's wife and the trader, the Dutch speak in Dutch to each other and *Melajoe Tionghoa* to the trader even though it is claimed that *Njai Alimah* has become proficient in Dutch. The factory owner's wife who is known as 'Njonjah Besar Admin' has just decided on a pair of earrings when Lort sees them and asks her about it. Their exchange is in Dutch



however brief. However, when Encik Amat bargains with the same Njonjah in *Melajoe Tionghoa* she lapses into a mixture of Dutch and *Melajoe Tionghoa* when she closes the bargain with ‘Kasih dan kwantantie, taroek maar plaakzegel’ (Oei 1904: 193) revealing her own knowledge of the native dialect. Alimah does not slip into her native tongue with Encik Amat but converses with both Lort and the trader in *Melajoe Tionghoa*. These conversations imply that the dominant language especially in situations of trade is *Melajoe Tionghoa* rather than Dutch or any unnamed ethnic language.

### FREEING FROM SUBJUGATION

In choosing to identify with the East Indies, the novels also reveal an anti-colonial stance as they portray the Dutch as superior but only ironically. For instance, in *Njai Alimah*, a tale of a love affair between a poor local girl in *Kedoeng Peloek* and Lort, the onderneming (rector) of the district, the subject is the subjugated. *Njai Alimah* is described in stirring and affected tones:

... seperti djoega satoe bidadari jang dating dari Kajangan, moekanja boender dan manis, bermesem mesem agaknja, matanja seperti mata boeroeng merak jang lagi berhinggap, toemboeh alisnja laksana titik dawat jang terloekis gambar. (Oei 1904: 4-5)

(...like a fairy from Kajingan, her face was sweet and pleasant while her eyes were like the peacock perched on a face like a picture with a tiny dot of ink.)

The glowing description stretches another page before it ends with the remonstrations of a worried father. Lort is described with similar hyperboles but the first description of the Dutch ‘hero’ underlines his love of hunting. Oei explains that “..Lort suka sekali sama koeda naekan dan main sinapan, kerna bolih bilang saban hari minggoe sadja pergi plesiran pasang pasang dan memboeroe di rimba rimba...” (1904: 16) Lort loves to ride his horse and play with his gun which he frequently uses to hunt in the nearby jungle. The fact that Alimah is likened to a bird and he a hunter implies a relationship of subject and the subjugated or the hunter and the hunted.

The author’s implication of Dutch irresponsibility and insincerity as well as the betrayal of Indonesia is implied in the novel. This ‘hero’ Lort, whose ‘honourable’ inclinations lead him to await his parents’ approval

before making her his wife fails to protect Alimah from her other suitors. It gradually appears that Lort is the personifies the disinterested Dutch colonial who expresses his honourable intentions to protect and provide for the East Indies but fails to do so. Even at this point, the personification of the East Indies in the character of Njai Alimah implies that the East Indies is more than capable of protecting and providing for herself without the colonialists. Alimah who is viciously courted by Kasdrim, the local headman's son, escapes and triumphs over her enemies without Lort's help. Her trials cover 319 pages, and she significantly experiences it alone. She is also responsible for the apprehension of Wiromenggolo, the local head mafia in *Poegeran*, who was causing trouble for her lover, Lort. The lengthy 18 paragraphs in praise of her virtue which breaks the narrative three-quarter way through, provides a brief respite, as well as a bridge for the sub-plots within the tale. The stanzas confirm that *Njai Alimah* is the personification of the independent spirit of the East Indies and Lort with his empty promises, the absent, cold and callous Dutch imperialist.

Lort, the only Dutch character in the novel is treated satirically. Seated upon his white horse with his gun for hunting birds, he is unmistakably the Dutch imperialist when first introduced to the reader. He meets and falls for Alimah who is incidentally the maid with the bird's eyes (Oei 1904: 4). He appears to make love to her but each time he seeks Alimah out in her shabby home, he ends up giving her money after trading kisses and hugs with her (Oei 1904: 20, 25, 30). The dishonour attached to the financial gesture is not lost upon the reader. Oei clearly sets out to write more than just a romantic tale. His criticism of the poor treatment of the native implicates the Dutch imperialists in their role as perpetrator of the economic and social chaos in the colony.

Oei shows that Lort is not only an imperialist by name, but presents him as riding on a white horse reaching out to give Alimah silver (Oei 1904: 20,30). Gouda (1995: 18) states that Dutch rule was overlaid with white male supremacist beliefs entrenched in male loyalty and superiority over native subjects. Wessling's (1997: 10) observations support Gouda's claims that despite the changes in policy exercised by the Liberal Party of the Netherlands there was no perceptible change in Dutch attitude in the colony. The conspicuous absence of Lort and the unsaid, spoke louder than the simple tale of two lovers. Njai Alimah's relationship with Lort underlines the detachment of the Dutch towards Indonesia despite the implementation of the apparently more humane Ethical Policy which Wessling (1997: 31) termed as 'capitalism dressed up like Christianity'.

Significantly, Alimah does not seek Lort's help when Kasdrim threatens to rape her at a party where Lort is the guest of honour. Oei deliberately alludes in his novel to the consequences of Dutch aloofness in the East Indies. Gouda (1995: 164) holds that the Dutch had successfully '... hid behind a "curtain of impenetrable whiteness"' with their 'superior self-perception encased in intellectual principles which beheld the natives in inferior states of survival'. When Alimah finally returns to Lort after her harrowing escape, instead of embracing her in relief, Lort questions her faithfulness to him (Oei 1904: 127) and threatens to end their relationship until she proves her innocence.

Unlike standard romantic convention where the hero on a white horse saves the heroine from distress and danger, Oei proceeds to allow the enemy to prevail over the heroine not once but twice. His heroine is also independent and strong enough to thwart her enemies unaided. The author's intent is made obvious through the subversion of certain conventions in the romance genre to reflect the relationship between the Dutch imperialists and their East Indies colony.

There is also perhaps the earliest indication of nationalism in *Njai Alimah*. The East Indies as personified in Alimah is considered the more superior in terms of virtue and courage. Alimah is said to have adapted to Dutch ways, learning the language and preparing Dutch meals in a mere three months (Oei 1904: 168-69) but she alone tricks and apprehends the dangerous Wiromenggolo and Lort fails to acknowledge her courage. The personifications in the novel not only suggest a quest for freedom from colonialism but also an attempt to clear the dishonour inflicted on the indigenes by Dutch colonialists. Lort's seemingly honourable intention, that of making Alimah his wife rather than his mistress, fizzles out when Alimah declines to wait any longer. Alimah requests to be Lort's *njai*, a kept mistress, rather than the respected wife of the house (Oei 1904: 102). Oei implies that Lort does not intend to fulfill his promise of making Alimah his wife as he had ample opportunity in the next hundred pages of the novel after Alimah becomes Lort's *njai*. The dishonour of being his mistress is underlined when a servant's response to a request to meet the mistress (i.e. wife) of the house is that there is no *njonjah* (mistress) of the house, but there is a *njai besar* (elder mistress). This small episode emphasises the distrust and anti-Dutch colonial feelings that burgeoned among the *pribumi*.

The animosity can be seen in the popularity of novels on tragic romances that developed in this period. When a union between a Dutch colonialist and the East Indies is implied through a marriage between a

Dutch hero and a pribumi heroine or vice versa, a tragedy is set to happen. The impossibility of the union is shown in the locals' disgust at the announcement of the impending 'marriage' between Alimah and Lort as it generated a riot requiring police intervention in the small town of Kedoengpoelok (Oei 1904: 153). A Pak Nagaipah expectedly proclaimed Alimah's marriage to Lort as a betrayal of race and religion (Oei 1904: 172). Her father's (Nasiman) death comes quickly, as a sign of penance or vengeance, after it is claimed that he had sold his daughter (Oei 1904: 171) for the love of money. He indeed received a paltry sum of 100 florins from Lort for his daughter. Clearly, the wise Pak Nagaipah summed up Oei's perception of the financial dependency between the East Indies and Netherlands as the sole foundation of imperial hold over the East Indies.

The slave and master relationship between the natives and the Dutch is emphasised in an ironic mode when Merto in Oeij-Se who is the paid guide decides to kill the white man for his treasure. As Merto lifts his machete to kill the white man, he addresses him as 'n'Doro!' while the unnamed Dutch turns around and ends his life on the word 'God' (Thio 1903: 13). The subject has clarified his position while ending the life of the coloniser who has thus far acted like a god to him and his people. Oeij-Se (Thio 1903: 59) in the same story refers to Vigni, the Dutchman as *pe kau*, a Chinese (Hokkien) perjorative term meaning 'white monkey'. Gouda (1995: 18) claims that the Dutch colonialists had deliberately rearranged the native traditional customs that ensured the profitability of their exploitation of the natives. The treatment of the Chinese and native labourers in Dutch colonial plantations resulted in violent hatred of the Dutch regime. Gouda (1995:18) adds, 'In another context, some Dutch planters approached Javanese and Chinese contract labourers on the rubber and tobacco plantations on the East coast of Sumatra as "beasts" who somewhat resemble human beings whom they could therefore abuse without moral qualms'.

To some extent, the shared colonial experience helped the Chinese in the East Indies to identify with the *pribumi* rather than with the colonialists or with China. In pondering a possible unity with the natives, the novels overtly or otherwise, raised such barriers as the lack of respect of the Chinese towards the *pribumi* as shown in the interactions between the Chinese, *pribumi* and Dutch characters in the novels. The economic dependency between the Dutch and the *pribumi* put them on different economic levels which differed from that of the Chinese who, as mentioned earlier, formed the buffer between these two groups as traders for the

Dutch (Grief 1988: 1). Because of the smaller economic gap between the Chinese and the Dutch when compared to the native and the Dutch, the Chinese had no sense of thralldom for the Dutch. In fact, the Chinese were depicted on equal terms as seen in *Oeij-Se* where Vigni, the Dutch trader was swindled by Oeij-Se. However, the Chinese is depicted as depending on the native. Oeij Se issaid to have enriched himself by buying Dutch florins from the guileless Merto who does not realise their value. Even Lo Fen Koei (Gouw 1903) employs native: Juragan Sardan, the district head Tabri (Gouw 1903: 107) along with a Haji Saari (Gouw 1903: 104) and Sarmilie (Gouw 1903:139) to commit villainous deeds for him. It would seem that the *Tionghoa peranakan* saw the Dutch as the enemy and the *pribumi* as a reliable help mates. Although the *pribumi* were perceived as inferior, they were depicted as unwittingly dishonouring themselves because of their guilibility and poverty as portrayed by the characters of Merto, Drono in *Oeij-Se*, Sarmilie, Tabri, Juragan, Haji Saari in *Lo Fen Koei* and Encik Amat, Kasdrim, Wirromenggolo, Prijajie Midie in *Njai Alimah*. The *Tionghoa Peranakan* writers consistently showed them involved in activities for money and lust. Often portrayed in supporting roles as gardeners, cooks or servants, they still held positions of consequence as in the indigenous characters in *Lo Fen Koei*. Their poverty and ignorance under Dutch colonial regime have led to their moral and material corruption such as the Regent who falls in love with Oeij-Se's daughter whose poverty is caused by his profligate ways (Thio 1903: 57).

What is important to note is the acceptance of 'dependence' or tolerance wittingly or unwittingly reflected in the interaction between the characters from the different races despite the subtle nuances of negative portrayals that reveal the prejudice of the authors. It is Drono who helps Oeij-Se open the box containing the silver pieces and it was Ramila in 'Lo Fen Koei', Oei's servant girl who is instrumental in unveiling the crime committed by Lo.

## CONCLUSION

Bhabha (1990: 3-4) has maintained that neither coloniser nor the colonised is independent of the other as 'colonial identities' were constantly changing. An absolute identity would not reflect them accurately (Loomba 1998: 179). To the *Tionghoa Peranakan*, cleaving onto the Dutch colonial was not a choice as the role of the 'middlemen' was rapidly replaced by

negative stereotypes propagated by the retreating colonial administration. China appeared too far away and alien to the *Tionghoa Peranakan* who were a hybrid in language, culture and identity and had rejected the traditional practices they inherited from their forefathers. The anguish suffered by the repressive traditional practices of the Chinese patriarchy is aggressively depicted in the romance tragedies that the *Tionghoa Peranakan* churned out in great numbers. To free themselves from the hegemony of the past and Dutch imperialism the *Tionghoa Peranakan* wrote novels that projected their community in a positive light. The genre of the romance tragedies helped to interrogate both the patriarchal traditions and colonial practices that were evocative and cathartic for the *Tionghoa Peranakan* who found themselves embracing East Indies as a means to an end in this pre-war era. Suffice to say that the positive depiction of East Indies personified against a negative projection of both China and the Dutch imperialist in these works written by the *Tionghoa Peranakan* serves as evidence of a future alliance with the *pribumi*.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> *Low Malay* is a mixture of Dutch, Hokkien and the local native dialect that had different resonances (Shellabear 1977-78: 37). There was an attempt by a distinguished *Tionghoa Peranakan* writer Lie Kim Hock (Suryadinata 1996: 187) to streamline the language through the first grammar book on Malay entitled *Melajoe Betawi* (1891).
- <sup>2</sup> No formal education for the masses of immigrant Chinese until 1905. See Leo Suryadinata (1978) *Chinese Minority in Indonesia (7 papers)* pp. 4-5.
- <sup>3</sup> No exact date can be given as Claudine Salmon in her book entitled *Sastra Cina Peranakan* (1984a: xiii) alludes to Nio Joe Lan's discovery of the works in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The exact date for the end of these fiction cannot be ascertained as Leo Suryadinata (1997: 201) claims that they were Indonesianized due to socio-political pressures linked to Indonesia's independence. Meanwhile, Claudine Salmon and John Kwee (1972: 221) both state that the interest in these novels waned after the Japanese occupation and thereafter only magazines were widely published as Balai Pustaka took over the literary scene.
- <sup>4</sup> "Indo-Europeans" refer to those born of native and Dutch parentage.
- <sup>5</sup> A term developed by Liem Koen Hian that was used to explain in the late twenties and early thirties the concept of citizenship whereby the peranakans had to work with the natives for self governance. Leo Suryadinata 1993 pp. 60.

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