

The Life of the First and Second Generations of a Chinese Immigrant Family in Central Java, Indonesia (Mid-19th Century to Mid-20th Century)

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Introduction

In 1990 a big family reunion of the The (Zheng) family was held in Ambarawa, a small town in Central Java (Indonesia). The reunion was attended by a great number of family members of the third, fourth, and fifth generations of descendants of a migrant who landed in Java on 26 December 1875.

To commemorate this event, a family tree listing and a family history book of the first generation (The Kim-san) was prepared by Mr. The Ngo-lun, the eldest male descendant of the third generation.¹⁾ The family history book was based on his first-hand recollection and a hand-written manuscript drafted by Mr. The Kong-liang, his father. Later, a book on the history of the second generation (The Kong-liang) was also prepared.

This paper will analyze the story of The Kim-san, a poor Chinese boy from Fujian (Southern China), who tried to improve his fortune by simply jumping aboard a ship leaving for Java. He landed at Semarang without any belongings. His struggle for a better life was fulfilled years later, when his son became a Chinese community leader (under the Dutch colonial system) in Grabag, a small village in the hinterland of Central Java.

I am the youngest member of the fourth generation and have the privilege of keeping the original family manuscripts and photographs. During my childhood I lived in the postwar family house in Ambarawa (Central Java), and I have written a paper about this house and its urban setting as part of my master's degree program in Belgium (1987). Based on these resources and my continuous research on the history of Chinese settlements in Indonesia, I will try to reformulate a more coherent story of my own roots. Since this study is mainly based on specific family accounts, any general analysis and conclusions derived from it must be regarded with caution.

Furthermore, because of poverty and lack of adequate education, many of the first and second generations of Chinese immigrants in Java were illiterate in written Chinese. Thus our family manuscripts were based mainly on the spoken language, and therefore

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1) The Ngo-lun died on 15 July 1994 in Semarang.

lack proper Chinese characters.

I The Life of The Hwan-poo (1854 – 1926)

A. *The Deprivation in the Mainland*

Our family history started in a small and poor farming settlement of Ohbikak, Je-bwee²⁾ village, Haicheng district, Zhangzhou residency, Fujian province in southern China. This place is located on the southern side of Jiulong Jiang estuary, across from the main port city of Xiamen³⁾ (Fig. 1).

Since the 17th century, this area has been known as one of the main sources of Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia. They departed from Fujian and Guangdong provinces, driven by pressures of population density, economic difficulties, and political turmoil, and attracted by a promising future in Southeast Asia.

In this village lived a poor farmer, The Kao-yang. He had no land, and his name was registered as the 17th descendant of the The (Zheng)⁴⁾ family in the village's family temple. In the mid-19th century, rumors raised about Taiping rebellion⁵⁾ reached the village and raised the hopes of these poor farmers of owning a small piece of land. This good news coincided with the birth of The Kao-yang's first son in 1854. Thus, to highlight his hopes and as sign of happiness, he named him The Kim-san or the "Golden Mountain."

Unfortunately the Taiping rebellion failed. Continuous wars depressed the economy of the country, leading the Manchu imperial government to impose various heavy taxes

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- 2) These names are from an oral account and have not yet been correlated with present place names.
 - 3) Xiamen was the last bastion of Ming rule in China, after the Ming were defeated by the Manchu army in 1659. The Fujianese resistance was led by Zheng Chenggong, who retreated to the island of Jinmen and then to Taiwan. In 1661 he managed to take on the Dutch who invaded the island in 1623, and setting up a Ming government in exile. This government was led by his son until his final defeat by the Qing dynasty in 1683. After the first Opium War, Xiamen was opened to Westerners in 1842. Foreign merchants established themselves on Gulangyu island. The city's prosperity continued until 1937, when the Japanese invaded China. It was from Xiamen that many of the ancestors of today's overseas Chinese left to find a better life in Southeast Asia, Australia, and America.
 - 4) This family name is that of admiral Zheng He, a eunuch, who was a great voyager of the Ming dynasty in 15th century, and who has been worshipped as the patron god of many coastal cities in Southeast Asia, including Semarang. Zheng He obtained this family name after being promoted into the rank of Grand Eunuch of the Ming imperial palace by emperor Yang-le. A Chinese Muslim from Yunnan, his original name was Ma He.
 - 5) The Taiping rebellion erupted in the mid-19th century, led by a strange sect of Hakka Christians. It swept across 16 provinces and destroyed more than 600 cities, being suppressed by the Manchu imperial forces only after 14 years. It produced large streams of Chinese refugees and mass immigration southwards.

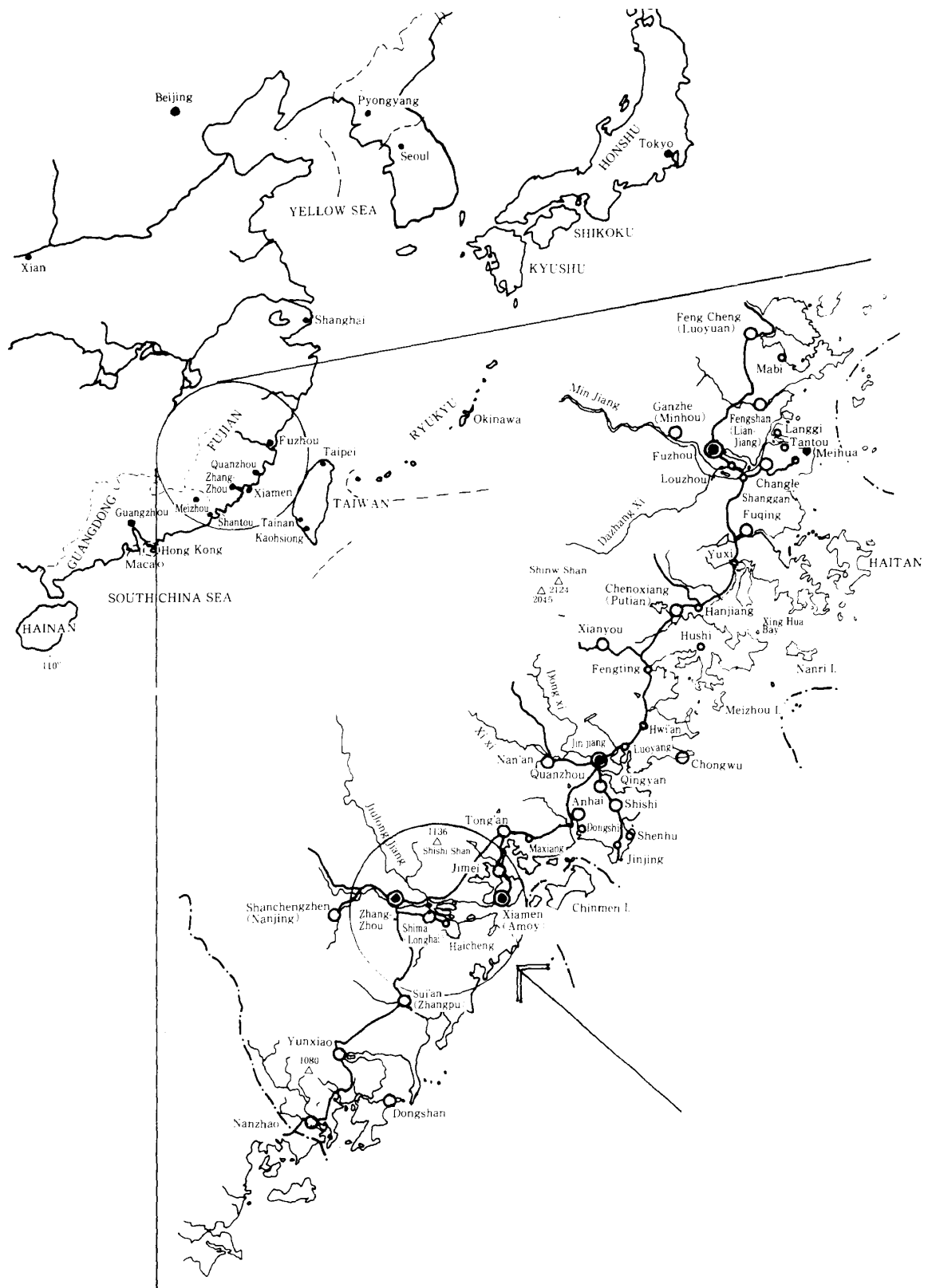


Fig. 1 Fujian Province (Southern China) and the Location of Haicheng District

on the ordinary citizens. Harvest also failed due to a prolonged dry season. In 1859, conditions in this village turned from bad to worse.

One day a friend of The Kao-yang returned from the “Southern Seas” with good fortune and stories about the peaceful and prosperous countries there. Attracted by the story and considering the risks, Kao-yang planned to follow his friend, but he was opposed by his wife who did not want to be left alone. Finally, because of the heavy economic pressure, they decided to leave their child with a relative in China, and headed south together. Since they could not afford to buy tickets for a ship, they just begged rides on small sailing boats. They never returned nor were heard of again.

The five-year-old Kim-san now had to work very hard every day just to get two bowls of watery rice porridge. He had no decent clothes, so somebody gave him an adult's shirt. Because he looked like a beggar girl with a long dress, people called him Hwan-poo. “Hwan” is a derogatory term for non-Chinese natives of the southern archipelago. Thus the nickname had the connotation of “an Indonesian woman.”

At that time, three languages were commonly used in China: the local spoken language (Fujianese), the local written language (*tjia-ji*), and Mandarin or civil servants' language (*kuan-hua*, later to become *kuo-yu*). Because Hwan-poo was illiterate, he obviously only used the local spoken language.

In 1862, Hwan-poo (the former Kim-san) became assistant to a mason. Beside two meals of watery rice porridge, he was paid few cents a day. He put all his income into a bamboo saving box and buried it. Four years later, in 1866, he himself became a mason. He still had a strong wish to find his parents and therefore planned to head south.

When he was 21 years old, he decided to go. After saying good-bye to all his relatives, he took his savings and went to the harbor city of Xiamen. He had no knowledge at all about geography. He knew the term “Nan-yang” or “Southern Sea,” which according to his poor understanding was the name for a city. At the ticket office he was told that with all his money, he could go as far as Java by the cheapest class. He agreed and boarded the ship, bringing a tiny parcel with one pair of pants. The date was 11 December 1875.

B. *The Journey to Nan-yang*

The ship, which bound for Nan-yang, was a freighter named Hai-tiu. It had no cabin and the passengers had to stay on the deck. The fare was relatively cheap, but the passengers had to fight for their rations three times a day. The temporary shelter covering the deck was hardly sufficient to protect them from the wind and rain.

On board, Hwan-poo overheard several names of places in Nan-yang, such as “Mankok” (Bangkok), “Singkapo” (Singapore), “Kalantan” (Kalimantan), “Bianlam” (Medan), “Pa-sia” (Batavia), “Sampalang” (Semarang), “Sulibuak” (Surabaya), and “Malang” (Malang), but he had no notion of their locations. He was attracted to the name “Malang” because of its simplicity, without realizing that it is not a harbor city. The ship made brief stops in “Hiang-kang” (Hongkong), “Sinkapo” (Singapore), and several other

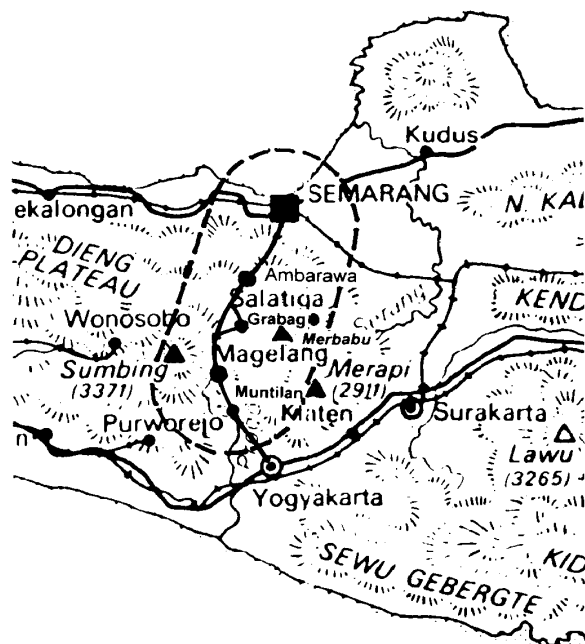


Fig. 2 The Setting of the Study (Central Java)

cities he could not remember, following the traditional route of Chinese immigration to the south. Fifteen days after its departure, the ship entered the harbor of Semarang in Central Java. It was 26 December 1875 (Fig. 2).

The shallow harbor forced ships to drop anchor several kilometers offshore. Small barges then approached to unload goods and ferry disembarking passengers ashore. By chance, Hwan-poo met a Chinese foreman of a barge called A-miao, who came from the same village of Je-bwee. Because he had no particular destination, he followed A-miao's suggestion to stay in Semarang, where he worked for a rich merchant, The Ing-tjiang. This merchant had the same family name, and also came from the same district of Hay-ting (Fig. 3).

The Ing-tjiang founded his business in 1860 and personally managed the company until 1899, when it became a major trading company called Handel Maatschappij The Ing Tjiang (Merk Kong Sing).⁶⁾ In the early 20th century, it was one of the largest produce firms in Central Java, its export of sugar alone amounting about 1 million piculs per annum. Branches had been opened at Surabaya, Singapore, and Xiamen, to carry out business with British India, the Straits Settlements, China, and Siam. In 1909, the business was still controlled by The Ing-tjiang, assisted by his son, The Pik-hong, and his nephew, The Oen-hiang.⁷⁾ In 1914, Kong Sing became the second biggest sponsor of the Koloniale Teentoonstseling (the largest trade fair in the Netherlands-Indies, held in Semarang),

6) This is the registered or official name of the company.

7) Refer to Wright and Breakspear [1909 : 509 – 512].

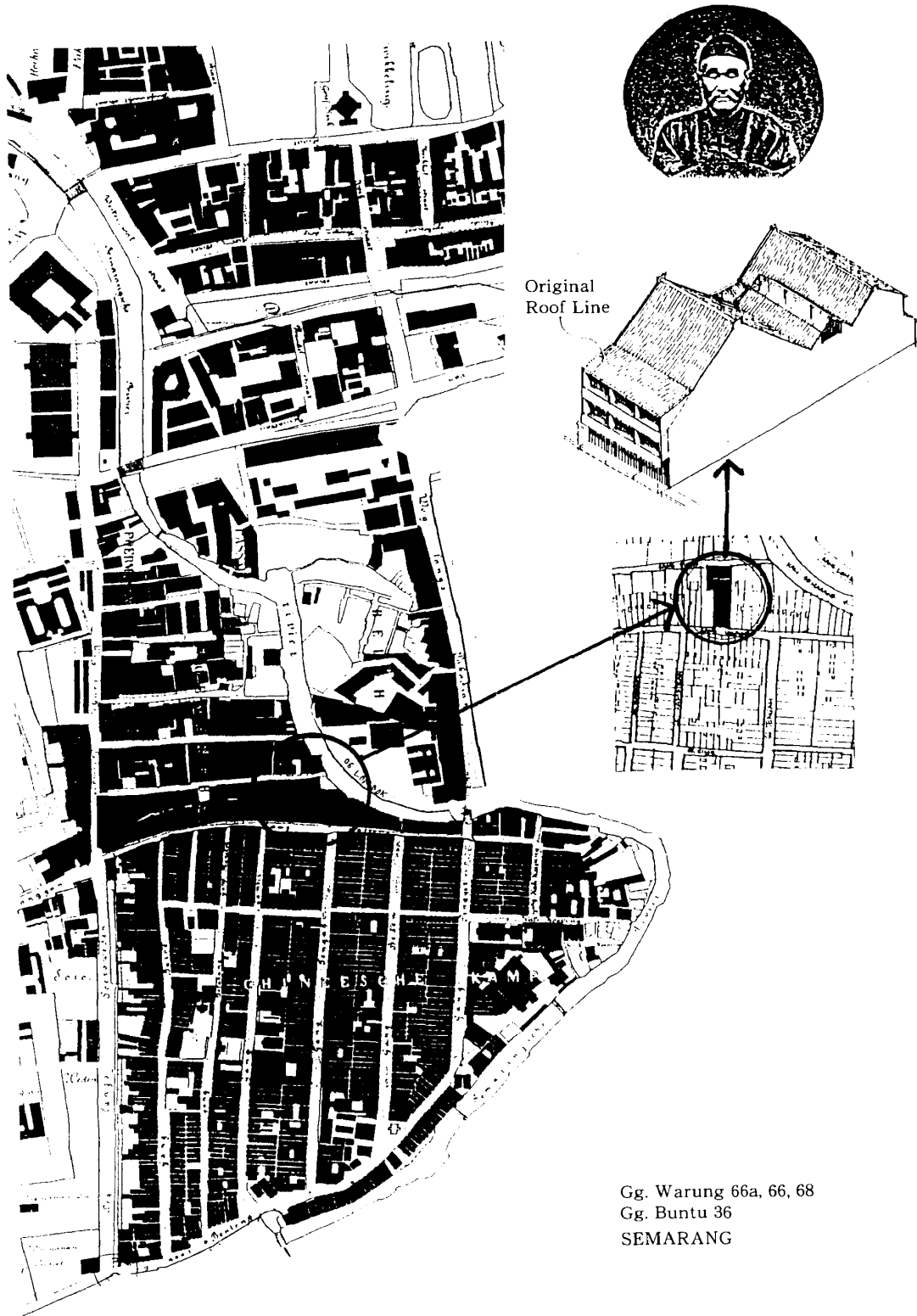


Fig. 3 Chinatown of Semarang in 1882 and The Ing-tjiang's House Location
Source : [Tillema 1913]

after Kian Gwan (the biggest trading company, belonging to Oey Tiong-ham), with a donation of 5,000 gulden. Later, this company was changed into "City Concern," the largest cinema company in Semarang, by The Sien-tjo, his grandchild.

C. Early Struggle in Semarang

In the later half of the 19th century, Semarang grew from an isolated port town into a modern regional city. In 1862, the public postal service was opened, and two years later the first railroad was constructed, connecting Semarang with Surakarta and Yogyakarta (the Vorstenlanden, the Sultanate of Mataram's territory). In 1884, the first telephone network was installed linking Semarang, Batavia, and Surabaya. The establishment of these vital communication and transportation networks was mainly aimed toward the extensive exploitation of the rich agricultural and forestry resources of Central Java, for the benefit of the Dutch colonial economy. Because of the excellent harbor and transportation facilities, Semarang rapidly grew into a very important trading city in Java (Fig. 4). This development was enhanced by the opening of the Suez Canal, which made the journey from Europe to Asia much faster and easier.

When Hwan-poo arrived, there was no immigration office in Semarang, so anybody from anywhere could freely land and settle there. The Ing-tjiang was one of the main sugar merchants in Semarang. He had a sugarcane factory which employed many unpaid workers, most of them temporary Chinese immigrants who had no specific destination. The workers received only three meals a day and free lodging in the workers' barracks. These conditions were considered much better than the desperate conditions of their homes on the mainland.

Hwan-poo's first job was to take care of the fire in the boiling process to make sugar, to haul the sugar into wagons, to store it in the warehouse, and various other manual tasks. He worked there for about three months. He lived in a large and complex house located between the main commercial street of Chinatown and the old supply road from the river. At that time, the Semarang River, which flowed through the city and was navigable as far as Chinatown, was the primary means of urban transportation in Semarang. Today, the house still survived in the oldest part of Chinatown in Semarang.

To prevent frequent floods from entering the city, two flood canals were dug along the western and eastern city borders around 1875 – 1876. At the time Hwan-poo was there, the western flood canal was being built, employing thousands of workers. Hwan-poo saw in this a good opportunity to set up his own business. He made wooden boxes to hold sugarcane syrup made of spillage from the sugar factory, and sold the syrup to these workers. He managed to collect his first income.

Just three days after starting his new business, he happened to meet with an old friend from his home village, who recommended that Hwan-poo follow him to Grabag, a small village in the hinterland, to work for a wealthy Chinese merchant. Hwan-poo agreed, and departed immediately for this new prospect.

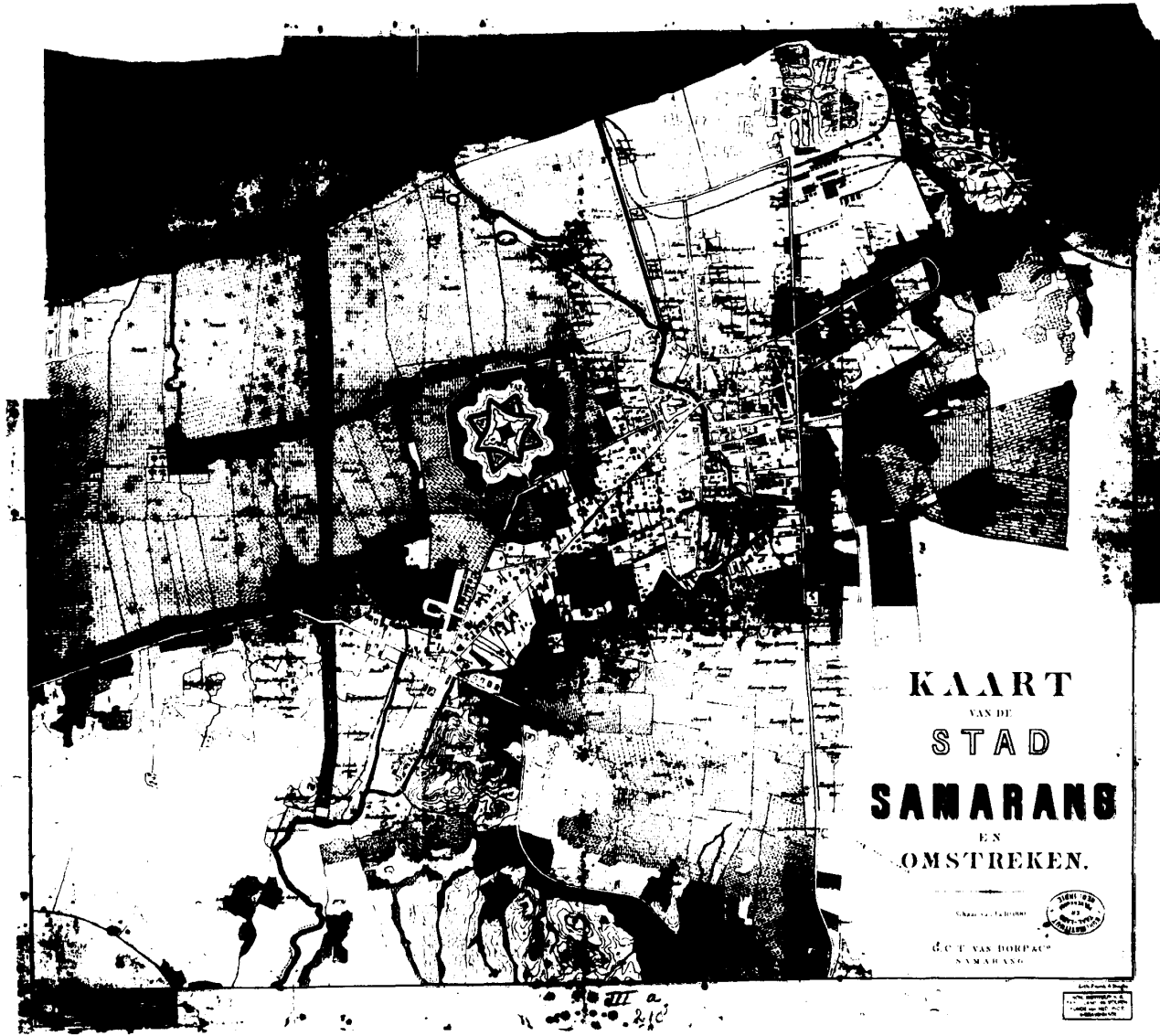


Fig. 4 Semarang around 1880 with the New Flood Canal on the Western Boundary of the City
Source: [*Kaart van de stad Semarang en omstreken 1880*]

D. Moving into the Hinterland

In 1876, Grabag was a small market village in the mountainous region of Central Java, set a few kilometers back from the Semarang–Yogyakarta main road. It was a collection center of agricultural products, mostly tobacco from the surrounding villages, which were then transported to the port of Semarang for export. The intermediary position in this prosperous trade had attracted many Chinese entrepreneurs, who settled there and acted as middle traders. The journey from Semarang to Grabag (about 50 kilometers) took about two days on foot, with an overnight stop in Ambarawa (Fig. 5).

The most successful trader in Grabag around 1876 was The San. He had also come from Haicheng district, and also had the same family name. His main business was trading in tobacco and agricultural products. He lived in a big mansion with a huge surrounding wall.

In that period no effective authority existed in the countryside to insure the safety of settlers. Banditry was rampant and everybody had to provide their own protection. Every night mines made of bamboo chips were scattered around the house to deter uninvited guests. Each morning these mines had to be cleared away and kept for the next evening.

Because of his strength, diligence, and honesty, Hwan-poo immediately found employment with The San. His main jobs were various manual tasks, such as cleaning the house, carrying rice sacks, installing the mines and guarding the house at night. He was even trusted to clean the master bedroom. He kept all of his salary inside a bamboo saving box buried in the ground.

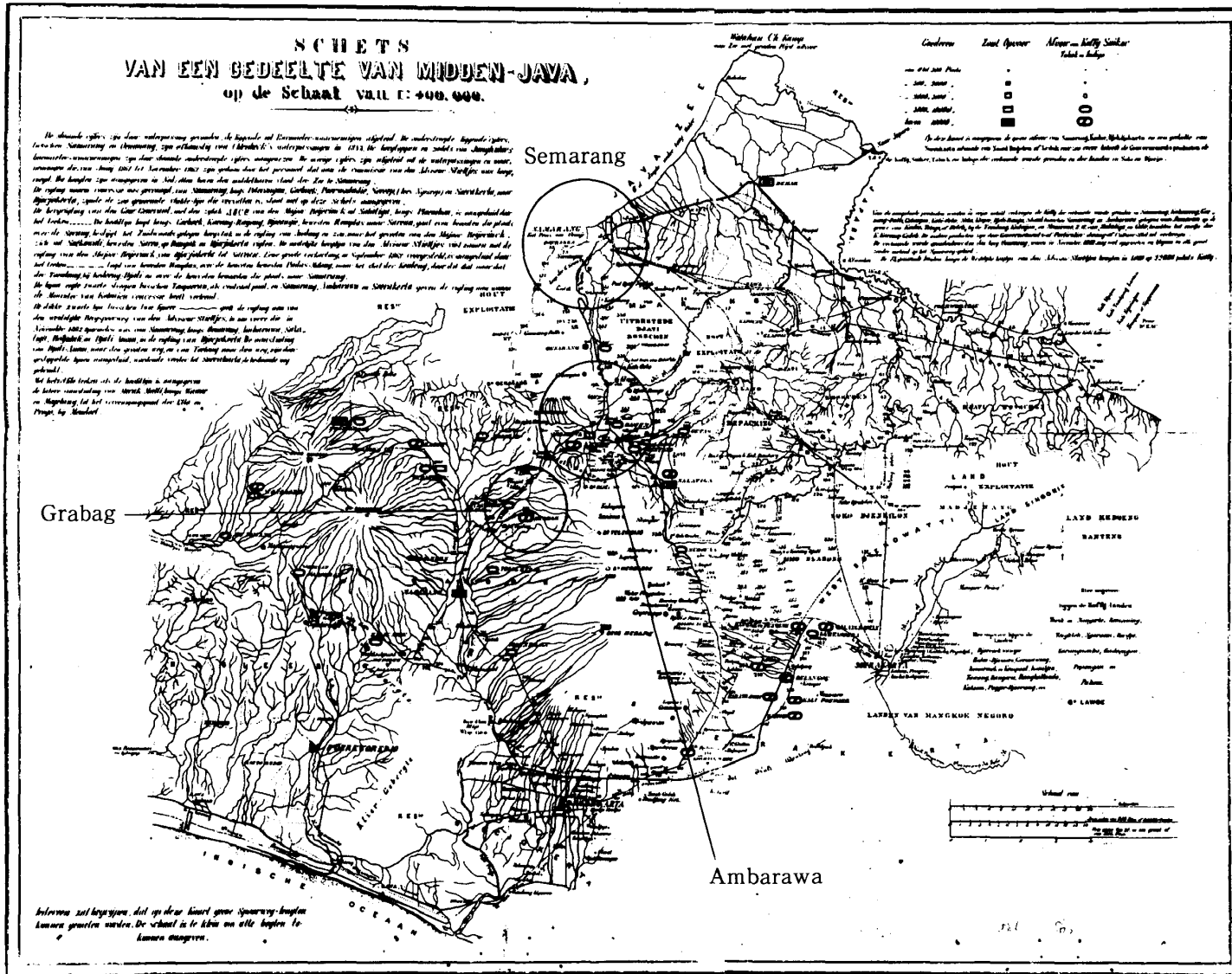
E. Settling down in Private Business

Hwan-poo had worked for The San for five years before deciding to start his own business. His sources of capital were his savings and a gratuity given by his former master. Around 1881, with that money he rented a small house and bought some baskets, and he began selling sun-dried salty fish in front of his shop-house. Because of his limited capital, he bought his commodities from another local grocery.

After six months of good progress, he decided to buy his stock directly from the main Chinese traders in Semarang. He not only paid a much cheaper price, he was also allowed to take goods on credit. This increased his business from the level a fishmonger to that of a local grocery.

A neighbor, also with the same family name, suggested that he marry his nephew from Magelang. Without many difficulties, he accepted this arrangement and married this young lady from the Lim family in 1882. She and her little brother moved into Hwan-poo's home and helped him to run the grocery business. In 1883, he built his own permanent house, a *konde*, or typical Chinese shop-house of hinterland style.

Within three years of their marriage, his wife suffered five miscarriages, so when she conceived for the sixth time her aunt suggested that the baby should be informally



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Fig. 5 Production and Collection Centers in Central Java around 1863, with Spots on Grabag, Ambarawa, and Semarang
Source: [Schets van een gedeelte van Midden-Java 1863]

adopted by a relative to save his life according to traditional belief. On 24 September 1886, a boy was born and was soon after "informally" adopted as the youngest son of The Ji-sing, receiving the name The Kong-liang. Two years later, a second child, a girl, was born, followed by two more sons in 1889 and 1890 (this last son died one year later). In 1893, when his first son, Kong-liang, was just seven years old, The Hwan-poo's wife died. Shortly thereafter, he remarried with a young widow from across the street, who would take care of his family when he fulfilled his wish to return for a while to China.

In the hinterland of Central Java at that time, only two languages were spoken: polite Javanese (*boso* or *kromo*), and common Javanese (*ngoko*). Since Hwan-poo's social circle was composed mostly of commoners, both natives and other Chinese immigrants, he naturally spoke only *ngoko* Javanese mixed with Fujianese. After his marriage to a *peranakan* woman (mixed Fujianese and Javanese) who could not speak Fujianese, he might have spoken only common Javanese with his family.

Almost 20 years had passed since he had lost his parents, and he had given up hope that they would still be alive. Thus, in 1894, Hwan-poo returned to his ancestral village in China to pay tribute to his parents. He arrived safely at his former village and was overwhelmed by the greeting he received from his former neighbors. The poor boy who had left 20 years ago had come back as a rich merchant from the south!

A son of a relative was given to him as his adopted child and named Liong-tho. Hwan-poo bought a small parcel of farmland for his adopted son and donated a considerable amount of money to the family temple. A grand ritual for his parents' spirits was performed, followed by a ritual to enlist the names of his eldest sons, Liong-tho and Kong-liang, as the 19th descendants in the main family temple register. He had spent three months in his home village when he received an emergency call from Java. His second wife had had an affair, taken his treasure, and mistreated his children. On his return from China, he divorced his second wife and began to rebuild his fortune from the rubble.

In 1895, he married a young widow from the Tan family with a son from her previous marriage in Magelang. Because his third wife could not stand the smell and the dirt of the fish business, she asked him to change to another commodity. Hwan-poo agreed and started to deal in tobacco and agricultural crops. His new business was very successful, and in just a few years he managed to build his own tobacco and rice warehouses. His rice mill was very productive and provided jobs for 15 workers.

His business partners from Semarang often visited him in Grabag, and he treated them with opium. At that time opium was legal and very expensive, so a person who could afford it had to be rich, and was therefore highly respected. Business transactions were done during the opium-smoking sessions in the afternoon in a special room. Opium was also served to the rich native district chief, who used to come to sell his tobacco. This was the peak of his career.

In round 1898, a daughter was born to his third wife, followed by a son in 1899, a



Photo 1 The Hwan-poo, sitting on the left of the table, and his family. Standing in the background, third person from the right, is his eldest son, The Kong-liang. This photograph was taken around 1920 in Grabag.

second daughter in 1902, and a second son in 1907. In 1922 his third wife died at the age of 55, having been married to him for 27 years. After the death of his wife, Hwan-poo retired, and in 1926 he died at the age of 72. He was buried next to his two wives at Ngasinan hill on the outskirts of Grabag⁸⁾ (Photo 1).

II The Life of The Kong-liang (1886 – 1959)

A. Pre-modern Village Life

The Kong-liang, the eldest son of The Hwan-poo, was born in Grabag on 24 September 1886, year of the Pig in the Chinese calendrical cycle. In round 1893 he began his elementary education in a *hak-su*, a Chinese informal school in the village. The school was organized by a *siu-cai*, someone who had passed the village level examination in China. The children received tutorials in reading and writing using Confucian books, and also in use of the abacus. In this period, this was the only education available to the Chinese community.

Every morning at five o'clock, the students had to go to the teacher's house to cook rice porridge for his breakfast and to boil water for his bath. Then the students went home to prepare themselves before returning to the teacher's house to start lessons. The first session was from seven until noon then they had a lunch break, and the second session would last until four. The school had only one long holiday, for two weeks around Chinese New Year, and several shorter holidays for certain traditional Chinese

8) In April 1988, the graveyard at Grabag had to be cleared away. Together with those of other families, his remains were cremated and his ashes were poured into a river, to unite with the Indian Ocean.

celebrations. However, Sundays and other “western” holidays were not recognized as holidays. The children attended this school for only one year, after which they helped in their parents’ businesses.

In the family, Kong-liang spoke only common Javanese. But since he had a lot of *totok* Fujianese friends, and had also learned a little how to speak and write standard Chinese (Mandarin), he managed to speak a mixture of Javanese, Fujianese and Chinese languages. When he spoke to a Dutchman, he used the common Malay language. When he met a Javanese noble (*priyayi*), he used polite Javanese (*kromo*). Kong-liang was very conscious of his position and the way he should address others. In his letters to the Dutch, against the common practice of the time, he refused to use the terms “*Toean Besar*” or “*Kandjeng Toean*” (Honorable Lord) and “*Hamba*” (servant), but used “*Toean*” (Sir) and “*Saja*” (me) instead.⁹⁾

Kong-liang soon grew into a strong and courageous boy, feared by the other village teenagers. Around 1903, in his early years of adolescence, Kong-liang started his own tobacco business, following his father’s venture. The success of his business was very much enhanced by the abolition of the *Passenstelsel* policy, which allowed Chinese to go anywhere without applying for a pass.¹⁰⁾

In 1904, at the age of 18, Kong-liang got married, and moved to a bigger house. This marriage produced two daughters, but the eldest one died when she was only five years old. In 1911, a severe smallpox epidemic hit the Grabag region and took his wife’s life.¹¹⁾

B. *The Early Modernization Period*

In 1911, China underwent major changes when the Manchu dynasty was toppled by the nationalist revolution, and the Republic of China was proclaimed by Dr. Sun Yat-sen on 1 January. The wind of change was also blowing in Semarang and Central Java. The new government in China issued an order for all Chinese males to cut off the Manchu-style pigtail.

In the Netherlands-Indies, the movement to cut the hair was at first resisted by the

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- 9) Unfortunately all the original letters were lost during the chaotic war periods. This account was given by his eldest son, The Ngo-lun.
 - 10) The *Passenstelsel*, or travel restriction policy was introduced in 1821 by the Dutch colonial government. The restriction was applied to everybody, including Europeans, but in reality tight control applied only to the Chinese. Before making a journey, the traveller had to apply for a pass and make a detailed statement about his purpose, means, destination, route, and companions. Together with other regulations (settlement restriction, special police court, abolition of monopoly rights), this Dutch policy was intended to break the economic dominance of the Chinese group.
 - 11) Around 1894 – 1904, mortality in Semarang was also very high, because of the spread of epidemics caused by poor urban sanitation. It seems that environmental disasters had become the main problem in Central Java in that period.



Photo 2 The Kong-liang and his second wife, taken in 1938.

older generation, being considered as against tradition. This reluctance finally diminished after Lieutenant Oei Tiong-ham voluntarily cut his hair in Semarang.¹²⁾ Kong-liang and 10 of his friends performed the ritual of pigtail removal in the village's hot-spring pond. Their example was soon followed by everybody in the village.

In 1913, Kong-liang remarried with a lady from another village. The first child from this second marriage, a girl, was born in 1915, and another girl followed in 1917. His father, Hwan-poo, was dismayed by this situation, as he was afraid that there would be no male offspring to carry on the The family name. Finally, his anxiety was relieved by the birth of a son in 1918 (Photo 2).

Kong-liang's tobacco business was very successful, mainly supplying big merchants in the regional capital of Semarang. Meanwhile, World War I had broken out in Europe, but the Netherlands remained neutral. This neutrality brought even more prosperity to trading activities in its colony in Southeast Asia. At the same time, Kong-liang's gambling habit (baccarat and *ceki*, a Chinese card game) became acute, because now he had lots of money!

In 1917 Kong-liang was appointed as Wijkmeester der Chineesen, locally known as the Loo-tia. His duty was to head and to take care of any administrative matters concerning the Chinese population of the village. His authority was parallel to that of the native village chief. If the police wanted to take a Chinese into custody, they should first

12) In 1889 Lieutenant Oei Tiong-ham became the first Chinese in Semarang to receive special permission from the Dutch Governor-General in Batavia to wear western-style clothes. He was one of only 28 Chinese in Java who was granted similar status to the European. Later, clothing was regulated at the level of Resident. The clothing regulation for the non-European population was abolished in 1905. Oei Tiong-ham promoted to the rank of major in 1896, to replace Major Liem Liong-hien.

seek approval from the Loo-tia.

In 1920 the central government applied the Civil Registration Law to the *vreemde oosterlingen* (foreigners of Eastern origin—mostly Chinese). According to the law, for a village lying outside the radius of 20 kilometers from the regional head office, a Special Civil Registration Officer should be appointed. Grabag was located outside the jurisdiction of the Magelang head office, so Kong-liang was appointed to that position. There was no formal salary for this job, but whenever somebody asked for a death certificate or a birth certificate, he should pay 2.50 Dutch gulden to the officer.

In 1923, initiated by Kong-liang and some Chinese elders, a modern Chinese school was established in Grabag. The curriculum was affiliated to that of China, and Mandarin was used as the main language of instruction, supplemented by basic English. This move was invoked by the rise of modernism and nationalist spirit in mainland China.¹³⁾

C. *The Economic Recession Period*

World War I not only disrupted the world trade system, it also created monetary instability in the Netherlands Indies. Everybody was troubled by the rising prices of basic goods. Central Java was threatened by the famine. Sugar production was reaching its peak, generating big profits for the Dutch and the Chinese owners. Meanwhile there was problem in the rice market, which forced the government to take over control of the market to counter speculation, black marketeering, and smuggling. Nevertheless, the rice price was rising uncontrollably.

The tobacco market was shifted from the coastal city of Semarang to the hinterland town of Magelang. The trading volume was decreasing, in parallel with the world economic recession around 1922 – 1923. The depression became fertile ground for the growth of gambling. Kong-liang, who had lots of free time and wealth, became member of the Sositet Hoa Kiau in Yogyakarta, and the Hwa Yoe Hwee Koan in Semarang. The main activity of these social organizations was gambling (such as roulette and baccarat). The habit was leading Kong-liang into bankruptcy.

In 1933 Kong-liang was appointed as a member of the representative council or Regenschapraad of Magelang district. In this council, Kong-liang proposed the provision of a clean water system for Grabag, which always faced severe problems during the dry seasons. Unfortunately the proposal was suspended because of lack of funds.

13) At the beginning of the 20th century in China, Kang Yu-wei promoted the modernization process through the introduction of a modern educational system based on a single national language (Mandarin), and by this he tried to unify all Chinese everywhere under one Chinese nationalism. In Java this movement was carried out by opening Chinese schools and by publishing Chinese newspapers. The aim was to unify different groups of Chinese and to orientate them culturally and politically to the Pan-China concept. The first Chinese school (Tiong Hoa Hwee Koan) was opened in Semarang in 1904, one year after Kang Yu-wei visited that city.



Photo 3 The Kong-liang, sitting on the left of the table, and his family at the family house in Grabag. This photograph was taken on September 1941, just before the war.

From 1906 until 1942, the administrative system based on racial differences was applied in the Netherlands Indies. A Dutch Resident governed from the provincial capital (Semarang),¹⁴⁾ and a Dutch Assistant Resident and a native *bupati* were placed in the Residence (district) or *kabupaten* capital (Magelang). The Assistant Resident held responsibility for the European and Eastern-foreigner populations, while the *bupati* took care the native population affairs separately. Whenever a regular meeting was held in the *kawedanan* (sub-district) hall, the Assistant Resident, the *bupati*, and Kong-liang sat in the highest place, followed by the native *wedana* and *camat* sitting in the second place. All native *lurah* sat cross-legged on the floor. Administratively, Kong-liang's position as Chinese *wijkmeester* was equivalent to that of the native *lurah*. But because of this special treatment, his status was perceived by the *lurahs* to be as high as that of the *bupati*.

In 1934, an election for Volksraad representatives was held in Batavia. The candidates campaigned for support in the regions. In Grabag, Kong-liang's house was used by H.H. Kan (Chung Hoa Hwee Koan), Yo Hing-kam (Independent), Liem Koen-hian and Koo Kwat-tiong (Partai Tionghoa Indonesia) for their campaigns.¹⁵⁾ Eventually, Kong-liang decided to join the Partai Tionghoa Indonesia. By that time, he had four sons, five

14) In 1930, Java was divided into three provinces based on the Wet of de Bestuurshervorming, and Semarang became the capital of Central Java province.

15) At that time there were four political groups within the Chinese community in Indonesia : 1. Chunghua-hui, led by Kan Hok Hui and his friends, struggling for the emancipation of the Chinese to an equal level with the Dutch, 2. An Assimilation group led by Kwee Hing Tjiat, 3. Partai Tionghoa Indonesia, led by Liem Koen Hian and his friends, who promoted solidarity with the natives, and 4. Sinpoo, led by Kwik Khik Bing and his newspaper, who promoted the affiliation with China. The last group was the most popular among the Chinese at that time.

daughters, several sons- and daughters-in-law, and a number of grandchildren (Photo 3).

D. *The Japanese Occupation Period*

Around 1940 – 1941, the economic and political situation was worsening. The Netherlands had been occupied by Germany, and the Netherlands Indies government was preparing to resist a possible attack by Japanese forces. Martial Law was implemented, and everybody had to take part in defence and air raid exercises. The Chinese from urban centers became nervous about the possibility of air raids and started to move their possessions to the villages in the hinterland. Many Chinese from Semarang and Magelang rented rooms and houses in Grabag for this purpose. This development worried Kong-liang, since the sudden and visible concentration of possessions in Grabag could generate envy among the poorer local community.

The Pacific War exploded in 1942. On 1 March 1942, Japanese forces landed in the coast of Rembang (central Java) and met no resistance from the retreating Dutch army. On 8 March 1942, the Dutch officially surrendered to the Japanese Imperial army. The sudden void of power and order in the urban centers along the northern coast of Java (Juwana, Pati, Demak, Gubug, etc.) caused chaos, and looters launched a massive assault against the Chinese houses there.

The situation in Grabag became critical, since rumors about possible raids by mobsters were growing stronger. The threat from the native masses was also becoming evident. To maintain peace and order in the village, Kong-liang asked for help from the *bupati* and police in Magelang, but they could only provide him with one armed officer. To keep tension as low as possible, he ordered the Chinese community to open their shops and carry on their business as usual, though with caution.

The situation became normal again after the Japanese forces took over the urban centers and controlled their environs, and the refugees returned to their homes. Under the Japanese occupation, the *wijkmeester* function was abolished, and all matters concerning the Chinese and native communities became the responsibility of the *lurah*. Kong-liang was appointed as *aza-cho*, or village section chief. Thanks to his strong influence among the Chinese community, Kong-liang was appointed as adviser to the *wedana* on Chinese matters. And because of this, some Chinese nationalist activists, who had collected charity funds for mainland China, were not arrested by the Japanese. This kind of activity was against the policy of the Japanese military administration in Indonesia, according to the Declaration of the Overseas Chinese Association (*Kakyō soukai no seimeisho*)¹⁶⁾ issued in 1944. Kong-liang organized the *keibou-dan* or locality guard force,

16) The content of the document is as follows [See Benda *et al.* 1965]:

We Chinese convey sincerest congratulations on the recent establishment of the Java Service Association as a practical organization cooperating with the Military Administration for the harmonious unity of the military authorities, government officials, and the ↗

and also organized the joint task force of Chinese and native folks to build the Grabag-Pagergunung mountain thoroughfare.

During the Japanese occupation period, gambling was prohibited, and violators would be humiliated by marching them in public. This sanction successfully stopped Kong-liang's habit for gambling forever.

E. The Revolution Period

The Pacific War ended in August 1945, and on 17 August 1945, the independence of the Republic of Indonesia was proclaimed, although revolutionary wars continued all over the region. The Allied forces (British and Dutch) landed at Jakarta, Surabaya, and Semarang, and clashed with nationalist fighters. On 15 – 20 October 1945, a five-day battle between Indonesian partisans and the Japanese army was exploded in Semarang.¹⁷⁾ Until end of 1945, continuous and extensive battles and bombing raged in Semarang and its hinterland. In the battle of Ambarawa (40 kilometers southward of Semarang), the advancing British force was driven back to Semarang by the Indonesian army. The Chinese population of Ambarawa escaped to Semarang, following the retreating Allied force. Semarang was then put under siege by Indonesian partisans. The occupying force of Semarang was replaced by the Dutch, and a temporary administration was set up there. Semarang was isolated from its surrounding areas.

Grabag was behind the battle front at that time, and no serious trouble happened there. But in 1946, the Dutch attacked Ambarawa, and Grabag was on the battle front. The situation became very critical after a serious clash between the Dutch army and Indonesian guerillas on the outskirts of the village. All villagers, about 300 in number, escaped to a smaller village about three kilometers away.

This disorder was exploited by the native population as an opportunity to vent their hatred toward the Chinese group. Initially, Kong-liang and several Chinese youngsters went to Grabag every day to check the village. But after 10 days, looters started to rob the vacant houses, especially the Chinese houses, in the deserted village. Later, the Chinese were prevented from visiting their own houses by the native guerillas. All of the

↘ various races.

We do not begrudge the cooperation necessary to the attainment of the sublime mission of the Java Service Association ; indeed, the establishment of the Service Association is viewed as an opportunity. All the activities hitherto conducted by our Association for cooperation with the Military Administration shall be absorbed into and united with the Service Association. The functions remaining to the Association shall be limited mainly to social projects of mutual assistance, such as welfare, education, and relief, which can be undertaken with the Association's own strength. The Association has already revised part of its articles of association and is now completing arrangements to adjust to the new circumstances.

17) Japanese prisoners of war were used by the Allied forces to fight Indonesian guerillas in order to reinstall Dutch control over Indonesia after World War II.

sharpened bamboo prepared by the Chinese refugees as weapons of defence, were ordered to be collected and burned by the native guerillas. The influence of the guerillas was very strong, and even the native district head (*camat*) was inclined towards them.

In this worsening situation of intimidation, Kong-liang decided to evacuate all Chinese to Magelang. After his appeal to the *bupati* and *wedana* was ignored, he decided to evacuate them to Muntilan, following secret advice from a native friend. Thanks to the advice to follow another route, the bandits' attempt to massacre all Chinese refugees failed. Everybody arrived in Muntilan safely, to be comforted and accommodated by their fellow Chinese there. Kong-liang and his family moved several times to different places provided by sons-in-law who had settled in different towns.

Around 1946, the areas of Java still under the control of Republic of Indonesia were the residences of Kedu, Surakarta, and Yogyakarta, while other small enclaves were controlled by the guerillas. The rest of Java was under Dutch control. With a cease-fire in place, however, the situation became relatively stable, and many adventurous traders started to enter the occupied areas. Kong-liang wanted to visit his sons who had settled in Semarang (inside the occupied area), so he took the risk of crossing the no-man's-land with the help of the irregulars. They were captured by the Dutch army but released soon after, and managed to rejoin their families.

This occasion coincided with the Dutch aggression against the Republic's areas in 1948. The offensive caused chaos in the hinterland of Central Java, and all direct means of communication were cut. The Chinese families from the hinterland towns were again evacuated into the mountains. News from the conflict area about the fate of the Chinese refugees could only be obtained sporadically through the Chung-hua Chung-hwee, a Chinese organization, in Semarang. During this frustrating period, Kong-liang often visited Gedong Batu temple¹⁸⁾ in Semarang to pray for the safety of his family in exile. Finally, on March 1949, he received the good news that the missing Chinese refugees had been found and had returned to Magelang. Kong-liang's family was escorted to Semarang to rejoin him. Three family members (a son, a son-in-law, and a grandchild), together with all Chinese male refugees, were massacred by the guerillas while in the mountains. These victims were then buried together in a mass grave on the outskirts of Magelang at the foot of Mount Tidar.¹⁹⁾

Kong-liang and part of his family lived for two months in Semarang, then retired to a more permanent home in Ambarawa. He passed away in peace on 25 March 1959 at the age of 73, leaving four sons and four daughters. He was buried in Rengas Chinese

18) This temple was built to enshrine the patron god of Semarang and the overseas Chinese, an admiral and voyager of the Ming dynasty, Zheng He, who visited many ports in Southeast Asia between 1405 and 1433.

19) In the 1970s, when Magelang had grown into a bustling city, a new bus terminal was built on the site of this grave to ease the inner city traffic congestion, and thus all the remains of the victims were cremated and delivered into the Indian ocean.

cemetery in Ambarawa. His wife, my maternal grandmother, passed away in 1971 at the age of 79.

III Concluding Remarks

The story of The Hwan-poo reveals several facts which pointed to the process of cultural assimilation of the Chinese immigrants in 19th century into the local culture. They were pushed by severe poverty in the mainland and took the ultimate risk of boarding a ship to an uncertain destination southward. These illiterate farmers and fishermen were immediately absorbed and adopted the local language in order to survive. The difficulty of transportation and communication between the mainland and Nan-yang fostered a faster process of alienation from their original culture and roots.

The immigrants quickly managed to make themselves indispensable at all levels of the local economic network, providing links between the Dutch colonial rulers and the native population. Sometimes, when they had made their fortunes, they made a sentimental journey home for a while, with no intention to remain there. Some very successful merchants even reestablished stronger ties with the mainland by opening international trading links, which they operated from their new home base in Java.

Most of the male Chinese immigrants in the 19th century married locally-born Chinese women (mostly of mixed Chinese and the native blood), or native women, developing a unique *peranakan* culture, because Chinese female immigrants were very rare at that time. The new evolving culture was undoubtedly different from their original culture in the mainland, and they became completely attached to the new homeland.

The Dutch colonial policy, which divided society according to racial differences, undoubtedly hampered this assimilation process. The Chinese minority group was given special status and power because of their performance in the colonial economy, and therefore became socially alienated from the native majority. This tendency was clearly visible in Kong-liang's era.

The alienation process was given stronger momentum by the rise of Chinese nationalism in the early 20th century, fostered by the call from the liberated motherland (mainland China) through a modern education system. A redefinition process of the culture and political role of overseas Chinese began evolving and would reach its culmination in 1965, before undergoing another sharp turning point.

Kong-liang was a typical example of a prewar modern *peranakan* figure: rational and pragmatic. He respected Confucianism and was proud to be part of Chinese culture. He worked for and enjoyed his position in the Dutch colonial government system. And he prospered within the colonial economic system. But he always tried to promote harmony among different racial groups, by preventing further alienation and conflicts. He was a

strong believer in social equality and also an anti-feudalist, as clearly shown in his attitude of choosing the words in his letters to the Dutch. He could fit in easily and comfortably with different kinds of people by using various languages.

During the revolution for independence, he supported the Partai Tionghoa Indonesia and was strongly sympathetic to the struggle of Soekarno. He never had a formal religion, but he always defended tradition and antisuperstition. He gave full freedom to his sons to adopt any religion, but he prevented his daughters from adopting any religion before they got married, because according to his wisdom a woman should share her husband's belief.

The question of cultural assimilation is indeed a difficult one, especially in a complex and difficult social setting like Indonesia. To understand this matter correctly, ethnicity should be perceived as a dynamic cultural process rather than as a static cultural product. The Hwan-poo and The Kong-liang were small players in this struggle, but they have given us—the present generation—good and real examples of establishing self-identity and adaptation to different cultures. Hopefully, this small study will provide some understanding and enlightenment, not just about the past, but also for the present and future as well.

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