PIONEERS OR CATTLE FOR THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE?
A REJOINDER TO A.R.T. KEMASANG

Normally I don't believe in replying to a critical book review. The book should speak for itself. Furthermore, not only does the author of the book tend to make a fool of himself (or the reviewer) by repeating in brief what has already been said in full, but the discussion may degenerate into a common quarrel of the type which should at all costs be reserved to the readers' column of a newspaper and should certainly not clog the limited pages of a scholarly journal, which could use its space better and for more serious matters.

The reason why I see myself compelled to make an exception to this rule is that in Strange Company I have devoted a footnote to Dr. Kemasang's work which seems to have provoked his anger, and, more importantly, because the editors of Bijdragen have given in to his demands and decided to publish his frontal attack on the condition that I write a reaction, 'to start an academic discussion'. If the editors feel that the quality and the tone of Dr. Kemasang's contribution form a genuine basis for such a discussion and that it should therefore be allocated space in their esteemed journal, then that is a matter of their editorial policy.

I shall reply to Dr. Kemasang by first reacting to some of his allegations individually, testing their consistency, and refuting them where necessary. This without doubt will be rather boring and tedious for the reader, and so I promise to keep these reactions brief. All the same, a reply to his lengthy tirade is necessary because such a reply will gradually expose a particular pattern in Dr. Kemasang's rhetoric which, I believe, is representative of a certain kind of historical writing of which I am not an advocate. In the second part of my rejoinder I should like to devote some lines to this latter issue. Should this provide an opening for a more general discussion on the role of minority groups such as South-East Asia's Chinese in colonial society, then well and good.

I feel much honoured to find myself referred to in the opening lines as 'the up-and-coming doyen of the Leiden group on the Java Chinese', but I fear that reality is quite different. One of the (few) frustrations that I have had while working at Leiden is that neither in the Southeast Asian Studies department nor in the Sinology department of this university is there anybody working on, let alone showing an interest in, the history of the overseas Chinese, especially as far as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are concerned. The only Leiden specialist on contemporary overseas Chinese affairs, Drs. Thé Siauw Giap, has recently retired, and his post has since been discontinued. It is, therefore, something of an enigma to me why I should be called the up-and-coming doyen of a non-existing group - or is this simply a rhetorical device used by Dr. Kemasang
to put himself in the position of an underdog and thus to win the sympathy of the reader as he, the courageous David, sets out with his sling to throw stones at a Leiden Goliath?

Over the past decade I have written on and off about two groups which, though they clearly fulfilled important functions within the colonial society of ancien régime Batavia, so far have only received marginal attention. It had struck me that by focusing on certain aspects of the conditions of life of the Chinese and of the Mestizos I might offer some new insights into the wheelings and dealings of the Company in Asia – not surprisingly, then, the book had the title Strange Company bestowed on it.

In retrospect (in the introduction I explain that most of these studies originated independently of each other), I now realize that I selected specific issues which shed light on the crucial relationships existing between the Batavian High Government and the Dutch and Chinese communities, such as: the mode of collaboration between these groups, monetization and market penetration, monopoly and competition, mobilization of labour, agricultural development, etc. The legal position of women and acculturation strategies are the main subjects dealt with in the two essays on mestizo women. Broadly speaking, I have approached these issues in two ways – either by studying them at the group level, or through the biographical approach. Against this background, it is a mystery to me why Dr. Kemasang should try to paraphrase Van Leur and devise the chinoiserie architectural construct of ‘the high verandah of the colonial mansion above (?) the rampart’.

Now let us check the allegation that I have glossed over the violent destruction of Jakarta by the Dutch. In the introductory pages of my book the reader is given an overview of the situation (as any introduction should do). In the briefest of outlines I have sketched here how the colonial rulers at Jakarta had nothing more than a plot of rubble and ruins to occupy after the wholesale destruction of the kraton, and not even a native population to dominate because ... and so on. The reason why I raised this point was, of course, in order to get to the heart of the matter: how were the Dutch under these circumstances to solve the problem of populating their new settlement of Batavia? They did so, in fact, by opting for the Chinese.

Referring to Parry’s and Furber’s comments on ‘the Age of Partnership’ in India, I state (contrary to Dr. Kemasang’s assertions) that such equal partnerships, ‘where European traders lived shoulder to shoulder with their Asian counterparts never existed in Batavia between its Dutch and Asian populations ... in ultimo’, and so on. If only Dr. Kemasang would not deliberately distort the picture by quoting selectively and at random!

To deny (as Dr. Kemasang does) that there was often a difference of interests within the Dutch camp, such as between the Gentlemen XVII, who wanted optimal trade profits, and the High Government in Batavia, who wished to rule a prosperous settlement, or between the latter and the Dutch freeburghers, who were anything but ‘free’, is naive, as I have shown. It also reveals an unwillingness to use or interpret the available sources; or should ‘the fit of absence of mind’ which Sir John Seeley advanced in explanation of the great discrepancy between the colonial policy of Parliament and the actual colonial practice in late 18th-century India now also
be attributed to the reviewer of my book? The title of Dr. Kemasang’s review would seem to suggest this.

Dr. Kemasang’s understanding of such notions as anachronism will be tested by his own allegations below. As for the words and concepts ‘nationalism’ and ‘racism’ which he introduces (they are nowhere used or referred to in my book), and then uses against me – let me put it another way: I shall leave it to the reader to judge in the process of following the argument whether these allegations do not eventually boomerang and expose the reviewer’s own frame of mind. If you play with fire, you must expect to get burnt!

There is the possibility, of course, that with all this bombastic assigning of labels Dr. Kemasang is merely trying to draw attention. Now, at long last, he has found, thanks to my humble self, a frame of reference for acceptance in *Bijdragen* (see his footnote 5). I am prepared to assist him by giving him all the attention possible.

Chapter II, ‘The Story of an Ecological Disaster: The VOC and Batavia’, has nothing to do with either Chinese or Mestizo women, but centres on the town *per se* in order to introduce the reader to the setting. The main thesis of the chapter is that Batavia became unhealthy not as the result of natural disasters, but due to the deteriorating ecosphere of the Ommelanden, which was thrown out of balance as a result of rash exploitation. It was not the deforestation of the Ommelanden which alone ruined the ecosphere, but the sudden retreat from the sugar plantations, with their fragile irrigation networks, which threw thousands of people out of work, made for alternate floods and water shortages, and set off a chain reaction which resulted in a chronic malaria infestation of the coastal area around Batavia. A series of ill-advised measures compounded the problems even further, and left the Dutch no other choice but to move out of the walls of Batavia towards the end of the 18th century.

Chapter III, ‘The Trojan Horse of Lead’, deals with monetization – an issue of great importance in Asian economic history, because it may tell us how precolonial society was articulated to an emerging colonial economy. In this contribution I analyse how *picis* were introduced during the crucial transitional stage between a precolonial and a colonial type of society, over a period of forty years in one particular place. Dr. Kemasang here makes a travesty of the concept of time by referring to areas which were already firmly under Dutch politico-economic control, and thus misses the point. In the essay I describe how the Dutch jumped the monetizing bandwagon of the Chinese traders, the largest purchasers of pepper in West Java, and, after a long struggle for power and many setbacks, eventually monopolized the *picis* supply themselves and so succeeded in penetrating West Java’s economy. I do not think it dim-witted of the Pangeran of Banten to give up the Gujarati connection and to opt for the Chinese one. After he installed Chinese in key administrative functions, this newly formed ‘Ali-Baba kongsi’ became so successful that by 1618 it had ousted the Dutch as competitors in Banten. The only response the Dutch could think of, having been beaten at their own game, was to move to and seize power...
in nearby Jakarta and to force all Chinese shipping that had called at Banten to anchor in the Batavian roadstead. They either lured the Pangeran’s chief assistants to Batavia or kidnapped them, thus finally gaining control of the production and distribution of Chinese currency. Dr. Kemasang is mistaken if he dismisses my proposition that the network of Amoy merchants which purchased pepper and exported it to China, fighting for survival in the game of power politics between the Dutch and the Pangeran, should be seen as a third party in this struggle, by stating that this would imply that they were regarded as ‘representatives of China’. This is a totally anachronistic suggestion. Fukienese traders thought in terms of loyalty first and foremost to their family, the kongsi, and only in the last instance, because of their religious and linguistic affiliation, to their home district. To view Chinese merchants, resident or non-resident, as potential representatives of ‘China’ betrays that narrow frame of mind that can be found nowadays among ethnically prejudiced adherents of Indonesian Asli nationalism. We shall return to the issue when referring to the Chinese network of shipping to Batavia. In that same section I shall show how both the Batavian and the Fukien provincial authorities were at a loss as to how to gain administrative control over this independently acting network of maritime entrepreneurs. Dr. Kemasang believes that all Chinese then living in Banten were already ‘Javanized’ and that Java was ‘free ... from racist “apartheid”’. Could he please explain why in that case they were living outside the town, in their own quarter, behind walls and in reinforced buildings? The ideal peranakan social model he would like to impose on early 17th-century Banten does not accord with historical reality.

The story of Jan Con (Chapter IV) is a tragedy in the classical sense because it shows how an important towkay struggled (in contrast to an ‘Uncle Tom’ like Captain So Binkong) to keep his ties with the VOC relatively loose, until he got entangled in the wall-building operations at Batavia and, as a result of the acceptance of advance payments to pay labourers, was thenceforth kept perpetually in debt, without the slightest possibility of freeing himself of these encumbrances as the work progressed. To leave the matter at that and simply declare that anybody acquainted with the horrors of colonialism could have predicted this outcome, the more so if the usurious interest rates exacted by the Dutch élite are considered, would seem of little interest to me. What makes this case an interesting one is that the Governor-General and the Council themselves were so aghast at the sudden death of Jan Con and the insolvent estate he left behind that they not only instituted an investigation into the affair, but also drew specific conclusions, singled out those who had made mistakes, and took measures to prevent a recurrence of this kind of bankruptcy.

As the analysis shows, it was primarily Director-General Lucassen who was rash enough to advance too much money out of the Company’s coffers to Jan Con. But Dr. Kemasang here sees an opportunity for drawing attention to the usury practised by Dutch landowners and singling out one Cornelis Chastelijn in this connection. Now, talk about being anachronistic! For not only did Chastelijn live some sixty years later, but also, as
I have shown, the cultivation of land outside Batavia’s walls was wellnigh impossible in Jan Con’s time. Paradoxically, Dr. Kemasang could hardly have made a more unfortunate choice than Chastelijn, a man who, to the exasperation of his countrymen, stipulated in his will that all his landed estates and possessions be given to his slaves, who were also all to be manumitted! Or would Dr. Kemasang perhaps like to suggest that Chastelijn committed suicide to expiate his evil behaviour? I heartily recommend this incident for publication in Kemasang 1990a.

The citation of Governor-General Carpentier’s warning against entrusting too much capital to Chinese again is taken out of context. For the warning was against entrusting capital to Chinese traders in China, who were totally outside the Company’s jurisdiction and upon whom no leverage whatsoever could be exerted in the event of non-payment. This was a sound piece of advice, I would say. Dr. Kemasang’s etymological explanation of Jan Con’s name as ‘Jangkung’, ‘the tall one’, may make sense in Jan (Pieterszoon) Coen’s case, but here is irrelevant, since we know the Chinese characters for Jan Con, as is shown in my book.

The Company, and not private usurers, as I have shown, kept Jan Con in arrears. I surmise that it did so intentionally to keep a certain leverage on him. The story of Jan Con and his large following of day labourers touches on the subject of the management of labour. Dr. Kemasang is not prepared to accept the fact that the towkay actually stood up for these people and implored the Dutch (when he left Batavia for China) to create a steady demand for labour by planning their construction projects in a methodical way. The mud collectors of Cheribon whom Dr. Kemasang suddenly introduces in this context from another chapter, which deals with Batavia 150 years later, were corvée labourers. If he is in doubt about what I think of this kind of labour, he should read my remark that ‘This work resulted in a certain death for the pitiable corvée labourers’. Perhaps Dr. Kemasang was once again looking for an excuse, this time to quote Barrow in full about dirt collectors, after he had discovered this book thanks to my footnote. He who slings mud gets stuck in it (old Chinese saying)!

Dr. Kemasang then gets personal and implores me not to insult ‘my (Dutch) forefathers’ collective intelligence’ by questioning their policies. Leaving the racist connotations of a remark such as this for what they are, I promise Dr. Kemasang that I shall never do so again!

This leaves us with two chapters still to go, I am afraid (I can only be grateful that Dr. Kemasang has nothing to say about my treatment of Mestizo women in Chapters seven and eight). In Chapter V of my book I examine and analyse the development of the collaboration between the Chinese and the Dutch in the first sixty years of Batavia’s existence, to show how the mutual understanding dissolved over the next sixty years due to conflicts of interests during the opening up of the Ommelanden.

My proposition that without the Chinese the Company would not have been able to run its headquarters without tremendous losses certainly would not have pleased many Company officials, although they could not have denied it. The two unhappy officials Dr. Kemasang picks out, Brouwer and Westpalm, indeed had a dislike of this dependence on the Chinese
in common. In the early 1630s Governor-General Brouwer was frustrated at having to confess that the experiment with the creation of a Dutch middle class had failed – it was the Chinese who filled the void. As is shown in Chapter VI, in the early 1730s Westpalm was an advocate of bypassing the network of Chinese trade with China and of direct Dutch trade with Canton.

It is quite preposterous to state that the Company blocked the development of a Chinese property-owning class in Batavia. The Chinese actually owned many, if not most, of the houses in the town and kept large retinues of slaves (as large as the Dutch). What was good for the Chinese was good for Batavia, even though there occurred a massive drainage of silver in the form of remittances to relatives in Fukien.

The High Government was not quite prepared to give Chinese officers the same share in government in the Ommelanden as they possessed in town. This resulted, as I have demonstrated, in a political void and in a tremendous loss of face for the officers, who were unable to exert effective control over their countrymen outside the walls of the town. As is repeatedly stated in the essay, I did not set out to make a study of the massacre as such – this has already been done by Dr. Vermeulen, and by Dr. Kemasang, too, in his wake – but intended to analyse the long-term developments that may have created the crisis situation in which the powder was set on fire. As I see it, the massacre of Batavia’s Chinese was the result of the crisis in the Ommelanden and not of a premeditated, well orchestrated Dutch conspiracy. If Dr. Kemasang wonders how a massacre can continue for days on end if it is not premeditated, then I advise him to read about pogroms in Eastern Europe, where the same dreadful phenomenon could be witnessed over and over again. One might add that a more recent incident in Jakarta also underlines this point. Racist tension and fear unfortunately do not need elaborate premeditation in order to erupt.

This brings us to one point where, thank heaven, Dr. Kemasang and I seem to see eye to eye. The crude contemporary illustration which I included in the book indeed depicts a massacre of innocents – that is how public opinion in Holland saw it. This also serves to indicate how outrageous the event and its massive cover-up were deemed at the time.

Alas, this brief armistice comes to an abrupt end when Dr. Kemasang denies the existence of an independent network of junk-borne Chinese Nanyang trade operating from Amoy. He actually appears to be a bit startled by the boldness of his own claim, and hastily qualifies it by adding that it was not an independent network ‘in the same sense as the VOC’s [network]’. I can only advise the reader who has not yet read my book to do so now, if only in order to establish that there was, in fact, an independent Chinese network and that it did indeed function on a different basis from that of the VOC. That is exactly what the entire chapter is about, and it was the cause of the friction with the administration.

The assumption that Chinese junks flying a Dutch flag were laden with Dutch cargo is wrong. A Dutch flag was flown by junks which had been issued with a pass by the VOC, as witness, for instance, the well-known
pictures of Japanese-owned and -cargoed junks sailing to Vietnam flying a VOC flag (upside down!) on their poop.

My ironic remark that fears of the ‘Yellow Peril’ (Dr. Kemasang conveniently omits the inverted commas here) are as old as colonialism, judging from the panic-stricken over-reaction of the Batavian High Government to Chinese immigration, is deliberately distorted, like so much else.

Did ‘China’s indigenous economy [in the early 17th century]’ really ‘fail to sustain its population only after – and as a direct result of – Western irruptions’, as Dr. Kemasang asserts? One glance at the work on China’s south-east coast economy by Ng Chin-keong, Chang Pin-tsung and Evelyn Rawsky is sufficient for us to realize that this premise is sheer rubbish. It is ironic that once again Dr. Kemasang refers to ‘China’ where he obviously means the homelands of the emigrants, the provinces of Fukien and Kwangtung.

As for the Dutch depredations along the coast of Fukien in the 1620’s and early 1630’s, the ‘Red-haired barbarians’ were effectively chased away and in 1633 soundly beaten at Liaolo by the legendary smuggler-turned-admiral, Zheng Zhilong. After that humiliation the Dutch in Taiwan were dependent on the goodwill of the Zheng clan, until their final expulsion from Formosa by Zheng Chenggong in 1662. Why not repeat once more — for reasons unknown to me, Dr. Kemasang ignores my other publications on this subject.

In the 17th and 18th centuries the Hakkas and Hoklos of Hokkien left their native district mainly on account of local pressures: starvation, clan feuds, overpopulation, and so on. They were also lured by the great opportunities the Nanyang offered them. The situation then was quite different from the dreadful conditions under which a massive coolie labour traffic got underway from the 1870’s onwards.

It was exactly in order to gather and place facts within their historical context, and to establish how the Chinese ‘merchants without empire’ (the term is Wang Gung Wu’s) extended their operations throughout the Nanyang, that I wrote my case studies, focused on these remarkable pioneers, who have generally been stereotyped in historiography as sly and cunning scum, deserters of the land of their ancestors, or, as Dr. Kemasang describes them, ‘as cattle for the slaughterhouse of Dutch colonialism’. Now, I ask, who is insulting his own forefathers’ intelligence?

I feel that here we have come to the crux of the matter. No doubt the Batavian massacre itself did take place. However, it was more of a tragic incident than an event which marks two hundred years of Chinese history in Batavia and the Ommelanden. I have described the Chinese entrepreneurs as recognizable, and determined, human beings. Too bad that these people will not let themselves be herded into the concentration camp theories of Dr. Kemasang, who would like to depict Java’s ethnic Chinese as the great losers of Indonesian history and thus to carve out a niche for them in the present-day Indonesian political context. To do so not only is anachronistic and nationalist, but it also denies the Chinese their greatest contribution, blemishes and all, to Indonesia’s history: the impact of these movers and doers on the modernization of the economic structure.
The tone of this verbal exchange between Dr. Kemasang and myself appears to me to possess a rather déjá vu quality. I think I now know why. Somewhere in section 5 of his diatribe, Dr. Kemasang draws the far-fetched comparison between 'the contribution made by the Chinese towards the creation and development of Batavia' and 'the contribution of African slaves to the formation of the USA's capital and/or wealth'. He even likens Batavia's Chinese officers to the black 'headmen' on the slave plantations. When Eugene Genovese published his studies on slave plantations, focusing on such issues as accommodation, hierarchy, and specialization, some twenty years ago, he caused an uproar among those who regarded themselves as the spokesmen of the poor, oppressed and exploited blacks. That particular debate - as vitriolic as, but of a more sophisticated nature than the present one - quickly blew over, and Genovese's views have now become generally accepted. Therefore I would like to conclude this rejoinder to Dr. Kemasang by quoting the closing words of a wellknown recent movie, viz. 'This is no judgement day; it is only morning, excellent and fair'.